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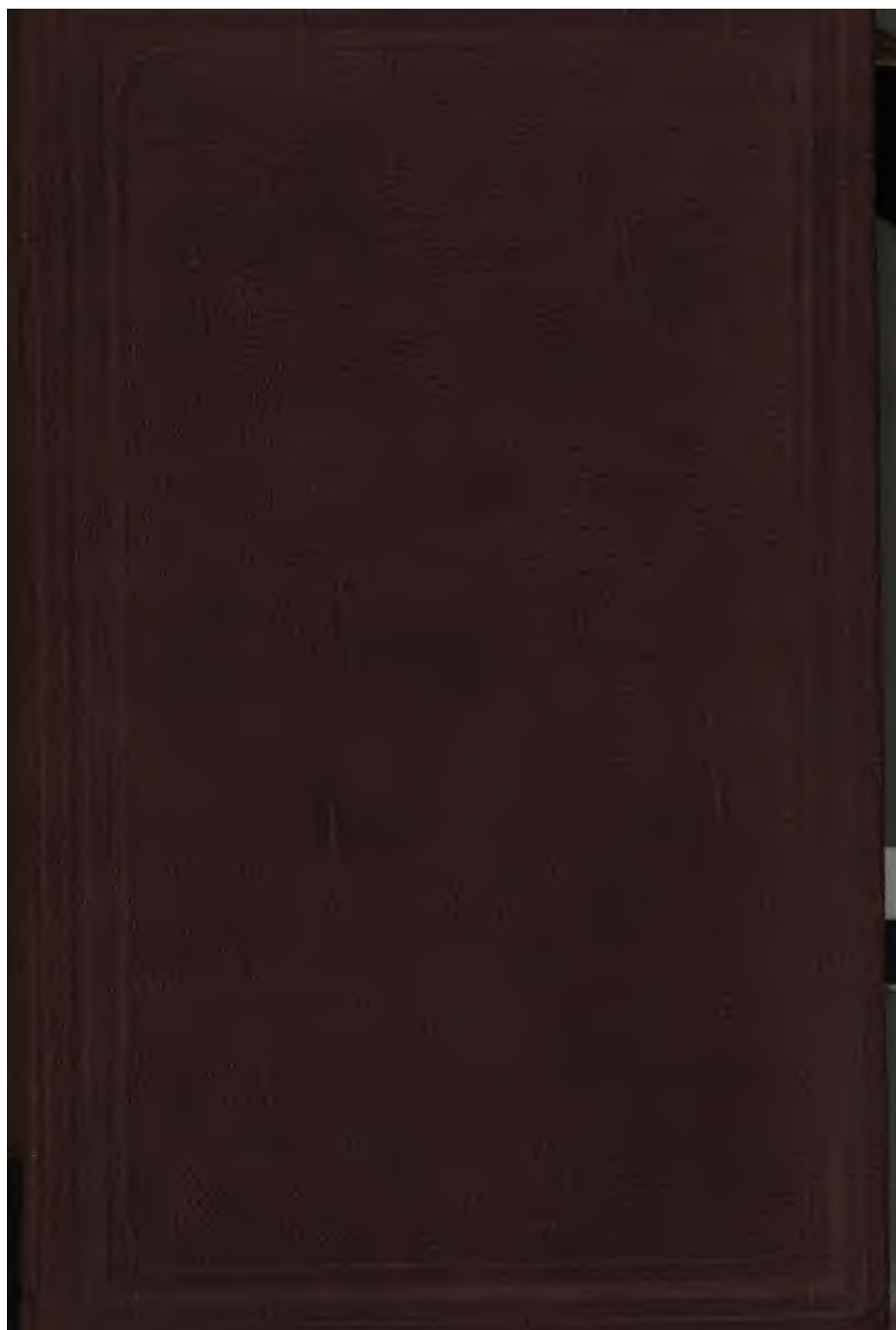
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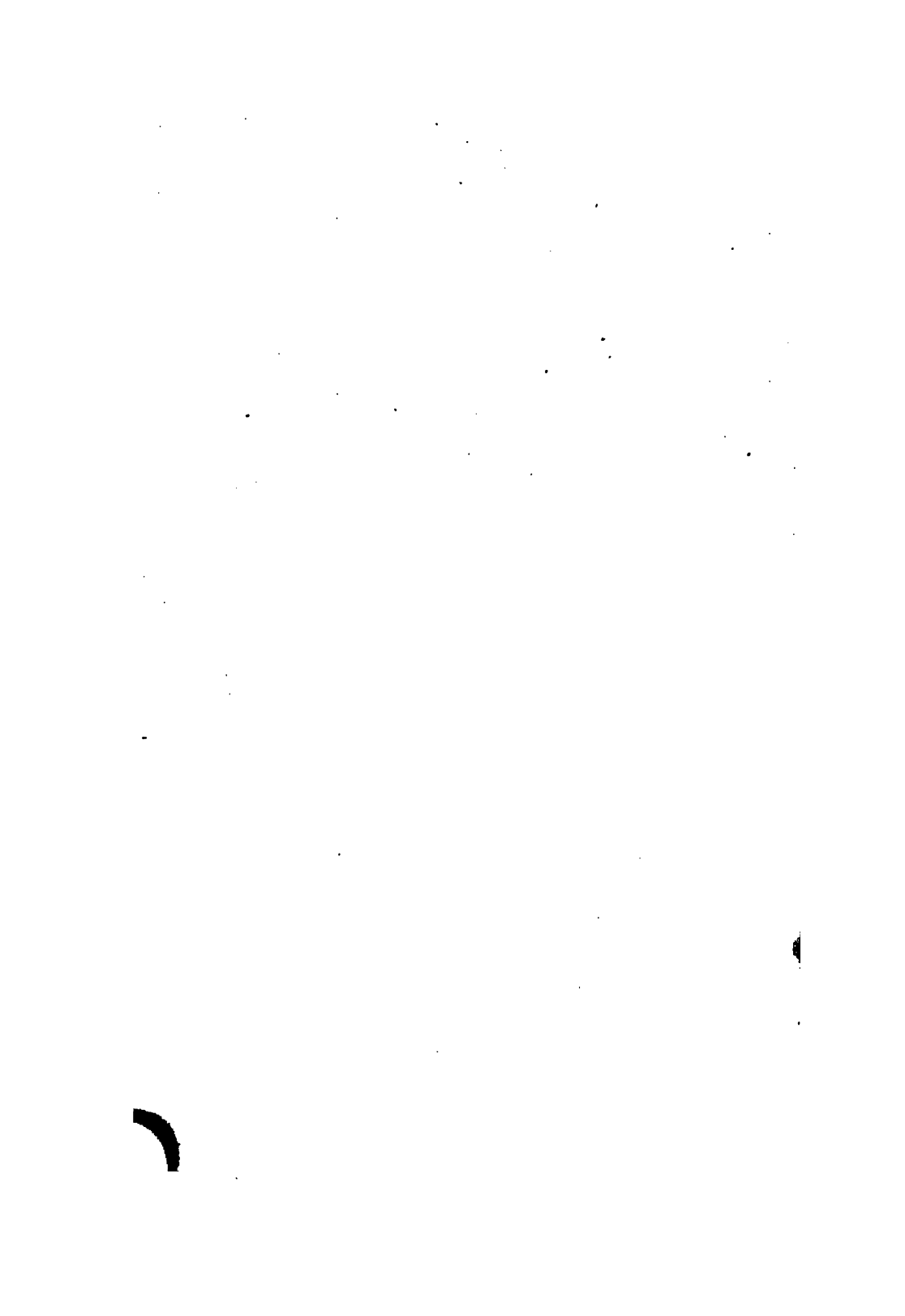
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the stronger sex ; hemmed in by proprieties, which tie our hands if we would work or act for ourselves : cheated, oppressed on all sides, looked upon as heavy burdens, and yet forbidden to shake off the yoke, and do anything upon our own responsibility. Hard it seems, in these days when there are so many unmarried women, left to themselves and thrown upon their own resources, that there should not be a fair field open to them all. But the men are jealous, and will not brook such rivalry, therefore they drive them back at every point ; sneering at their masculine, strong-minded ways, and hinting that a woman's only place is beside the domestic hearth ; there to do the pleasure of her lord and master, to study his tastes, and tend his children. True, and I should think there are few women (so strong is their instinct), who would not gladly exchange their laurels,—the poet's wreath, the triumphs of successful authorship, the artist's labours, and dreams of future fame,—all, all their toil, and glory



too, for the privilege of bearing the time-honoured name of wife; ay, and of folding their own children to their hearts. But there are too many women doomed to a poverty-stricken, lonely life; and if men do not want them as companions, or care to help them, what wonder is it if they try to help themselves? I say, God bless their noble energy and efforts, for it is as praiseworthy to work, as it is disgraceful to sit still and complain. But oh! will such matters ever be set straight in this world, or must they remain thus to the very end? Who can tell? Not I; though this I do know;—that my own helplessness was a sore burden to me when first left alone.

Such were my reflections, whilst uncouth Betsy groped about for wood, and then heaped it on in the most inartistic manner, thereby endangering the last sparks of fire. I took it off again with my fingers, and arranged it better; then I remembered Mr. Robertson's promise to get in coal in readiness, &c.,

and I enquired whether there was none to be found.

“Don’t know,” was the answer; so I went out in the dusk to investigate the coal-place for myself. It was empty, for he had entirely forgotten either to have it filled, or the garden put in order; and there were only a few pieces of wood left—by a lucky chance—by the people employed to take charge of the house until our landlord found a tenant. This was not encouraging on such a cold evening, but there was no possibility of getting anything before morning—if then—and I only hoped we should not be quite frozen before new supplies arrived.

“Now for the dinner,” I thought next; that is, for the apology for that meal; and I observed to Betsy: “You can cook a little?”

“Oh, yes! I can make beef steak puddings, and dumplings, and boil things,” was the ready answer.

“The list of her accomplishments is easily made out,” I reflected with dismay. “But

never mind. I must order 'Soyer's Shilling Cookery,' and learn to manage for myself. I shall soon get used to it; but the nuisance is having nothing ready, and no one to help me just at first."

Here Miss Prince looked in, and with a very querulous, miserable tone and look, exclaimed—

"Florence, dear, what are you doing? And are we going to have anything to eat to-day?"

"I hope so," was my response. "But don't trouble yourself. Go back and rest upon the sofa till I come, and I will open some wine and bring you a glass directly."

"But I am so cold, and the fire is nearly out."

"Put on your cloak again, whilst I see to the fire."

And seizing a log or two of wood, I soon produced a cheerful blaze; whilst Miss Prince settled herself, groaning and grumbling, upon the sofa. I was then preparing to —

set to work with energy, when I was once more recalled.

“Don’t stay long. I feel so dull, and it is growing very dark.”

I think I was wonderfully patient, considering my nature and all the trials of that miserable day ; but I considered that I had (though unintentionally) brought these troubles upon poor Miss Prince, and that I therefore owed her some amends. So I flew and rummaged out candlesticks, put candles in (for Betsy’s efforts were clumsy beyond expression), lighted them, drew down the sitting room blinds, and bade Betsy lock and bar the outer door, and see to the fastenings of the windows. She tormented me with questions about shutters and so forth, until I bade her be quiet until I had time to attend to her, upon which she again subsided into her chair in a corner of the kitchen, sitting there with the back door open to create a draught, and her candle flaring and flickering and wasting on the table, until I again

aroused her to wash some plates and glasses, which small duties I was happy to find she could perform without assistance. In fact, I was actually beginning to feel thankful that she was capable of doing anything whatever.

Luckily I had remembered to bring some house linen, and a few forks and spoons, and other matters of the kind, or we should have been badly off indeed; and I now stumbled up the narrow, awkward stairs, to unlock and partly unpack the box containing those commodities. Sheets had to be aired for the beds, as I impressed upon Betsey, at the same time begging her, as a favour, not to set the house on fire; and next I laid the cloth, during which operation a piteous voice informed me that Miss Prince was fainting.

“Oh, I had forgotten. I will bring the wine.”

Whereupon there ensued a hunt for a corkscrew, which being found at last, I feebly attempted to draw a cork—the first time I had ever made the essay. But, alas! my

wrists, always rather delicate and slender—made for lighter work in fact—were now so weak from fatigue and recent illness, that for a long time my efforts were in vain. I called upon Betsy; but though her wrists were stronger by far, her natural clumsiness more than counterbalanced that advantage, and after many protestations that she was sure she could not do it, and that I should do it better, she finally succeeded in breaking the cork and forcing the lower half—not out—but into the bottle. I am almost ashamed to write these trivial details, but they are too characteristic of our situation to be altogether omitted; and though I have often laughed over the remembrance of them since, they were very real evils at the time. However, the wine was opened somehow, and exclaiming, “Thank goodness!” I refreshed myself with a glass of it in haste, for I had strained my side and wrists with tugging at the cork. I had been running in and out of the yard, standing in draughts, and otherwise trying my strength,

until more than once I had turned giddy, and been on the point of falling. It seemed to warm my frozen heart and fingers, and give me strength to go on settling the house ; so carrying it in to Miss Prince, who made a face at the ugly black bottle, but had no objection to the contents, apparently, and also placing some bread and butter in her reach, I returned to the kitchen, and frizzled some mutton on the gridiron. That, served in rather a rough fashion, tasting rather strong of smoke, and ungarnished even by a potatoe, was eaten like a sort of passover, and then—spite of Miss Prince's entreaties that I would stay and talk to her a little—I set to work again ; for I began to feel that if I did not get through with all I had to do at once, my strength would once more fail, and I should be incapable of doing it at all. And then what would become of all the party ? I was becoming, all at once, a person of importance and responsibility.

I helped to make up the beds, and put the

rooms in order, uncord the boxes, and so on; then I looked to bolts and locks, and thereby found that some of the windows had no fastening—a discovery that I would fain have kept concealed from Miss Prince, who was already fidgetting about thieves; next I had a fire lighted, with the last remaining pieces of wood, in the larger upstairs room, for the atmosphere was chilling and damp as that of a vault; and then I superintended the setting of the tea-tray—finding that there was rather a dearth of cups and saucers, that everything was in confusion, every article in a wrong place, and every cupboard and corner most unclean—suggesting endless scrubbing and arranging; saucepans and kettles battered to pieces, other kitchen implements which had evidently been used for every purpose but the lawful one, and which I felt afraid to touch; in short, such a scene of dirt and disorder as I had never witnessed before, and I trust never shall again. But at length, panting and exhausted, I washed my hands and face, and

smoothed my hair, and then flung myself, thoroughly out of heart, upon the sofa, which Miss Prince had lately vacated in favour of an arm-chair, drawn close up to the fire.

It never occurred to that good lady that she might try to help me in the least; but there she sat, with the air of a martyr, wondering, alternately about her tea and about thieves; and tormenting me with a host of frivolous and vexatious questions;—whether I should write to Mr. Robertson, (advising me, if so, to ‘speak my mind’); whether I should dream of staying in such a ‘pigstie of a place,’—and many more enquiries of the same kind, which I was too tired and out of heart to answer; their only result being to cause my over-strung nerves to give way, so that I suddenly burst into a violent fit of crying; which alarmed Miss Prince, and added to the exhaustion from which I was already suffering.

“Oh, dear me!” cried Miss Prince, “this is very distressing; but I daresay a cup of tea would do you good.”

She accordingly flew at the bell,—there actually was a bell,—and rang such a peal that Betsy flew in, open-mouthed.

“Bring tea at once,” was her command.

“On the tray—as Miss Brandreth set it? Or shall I lay the cloth?” was the response.

“No, no! The tray, of course. The cloth is never laid for tea.”

“And shall I bring the kettle in to boil?”

“What! is it not already boiling in the kitchen?”

“No, ma’am; the fire’s gone clean out.”

“Then you ought to have looked to it,” was the querulous rejoinder. “It is so awkward and inconvenient. Dear me, how shall we get on in this wretched place?”

Such was Miss Prince’s final exclamation, as she slightly wandered from the point; whilst I lay listening to this original conversation;—annoyed, and yet amused, and far too weary to exert myself any more.

“Then am I to bring it in here, ma’am?” enquired stupid Betsy, for the second time.

Miss Prince, answered snappishly,

“Of course. I told you so. And mind you don’t let this occur another time. There, do not chatter, but be quick about it, for Miss Brandreth wants her tea,” (which meant that Miss Prince wanted hers without delay).

Exit Betsy, with a stolid, sulky air; and presently a great black, grimy kettle is thrust violently into the midst of the fire; creating much smoke, and putting out the cheerful blaze. Then, a rattling and blundering outside, and the tea-tray, carefully disarranged, is set anyhow upon the table, whilst Miss Prince looks on with a helpless, hopeless air. Next Betsy disappears, and returns with a loaf of bread, and also—a piece of cheese, which she places immediately under the indignant nose of poor Miss Prince, who starts back from it in horror. I feel incapable of rising and attending to matters myself; but this last incident strikes me as so absurd that I cannot help bursting into an uncontrollable

fit of laughter ; whilst Miss Prince exclaims, in tragic accents,

“ Take that away again, for goodness sake.”

Upon which Betsy first seizes the bread, and then the butter, next a tea-cup, and after that a plate ; in fact, any article but the right one ; for she is slow of comprehension, and does not see anything odd in the matter, being accustomed to take cheese with her own tea ; and I believe with her breakfast too,—the savage ! But at length the offending dish is thrust into her hand, whilst she stares at me in great amazement. Then, once more exit, whilst I continue to laugh on, for I cannot check myself ; and at length Miss Prince approaches me, exclaiming,

“ Florence dear, what is it ? Not hysterics ? ”

“ No ; the scene with Betsy. What a civilized young woman ! ”

“ Ah, she'll never do,—ignorant creature ! But how we shall get another passes me.”

“Let us give her a fair trial first. She’s raw and inexperienced at present.”

Miss Prince drew in her breath, and rubbed her hands, according to her custom when particularly nervous; whilst I, from very weakness and exhaustion, broke into a second peal of laughter. Upon which Miss Prince fidgeted and teased me till I nearly cried again; and then vowed that I must be in hysterics; assuring me with great magnanimity that I might comfort myself with the reflection that—hard upon her as all this was—she would not think of leaving me to meet my fate alone.

“No; I will not desert you, Florence dear. Other people, whom you loved and trusted more, might; but you shall see that your poor friend still remains unchanged.”

“Thank you. It is very kind to say so,” was my answer, and then I turned away and closed my eyes, by way of a quiet hint that she had said enough.

So she busied herself with making tea;

bustling about and grumbling *sotto voce* all the time. Then we drank it, and dismissed the tray; then I roused myself to instruct Betsy in the simple art of carrying hot water up to the rooms, but could not find a tin can, or anything but a large cracked jug,—so few were the resources of the “Retreat.” And by going upstairs I discovered that the fire was quite out, and that the room felt more like a vault than ever; so I stayed and superintended the re-lighting of the still warm logs of wood; and after a few other little matters of the same kind had been attended to, Betsy was finally dismissed for the night. As for the unlucky green-house stove, that was quite forgotten in the bustle and confusion.

Then I went down again, to sit a little by the fire, and, if possible, to think. My ideas wanted clearing and arranging quite as much as the goods and chattels of the miserable “Retreat,” but Miss Prince never left me long in peace, and at length enquired whether we had not better go to bed.

"Though I know I shall never have a moment's sleep," she added.

I shuddered, for the loneliness of the spot now forced itself upon my mind so overwhelmingly, that I could not bear to stir; and as for rest, that seemed an impossibility; so I replied:

"I do not feel inclined to go upstairs at present; but don't you wait on any account."

"It's rather dreary going up alone, and rather dull for you remaining here; so I think I had better wait."

And accordingly, down she sat again. Provoking! when I wanted so much to be alone. I tried persuasion as a means of getting rid of her, and as a last resource, lighted a candle and placed it in her hand. No, I am forgetting, for the house only boasted the pair of battered tall candlesticks upon the table, and a broken one to light the kitchen; therefore I had to deliver up one of the two in front of me, and prepare to write (for such was my intention)] by the

ghostly gleam of the remaining, one. But Miss Prince was not yet gone.

"And which room am I to have? We have not yet settled that," she next observed.

"Whichever you prefer," was my weary answer, but she tormented me into going upstairs whilst she decided. And first she thought she would have the larger room, on account of the fire-place, but she fancied the the two windows—one at each end—made a draught; and when she found that one possessed no fastening, she quite resolved to take the smaller room; subsiding into it with sundry complaints and gestures of discontent; and leaving me to the mercy of the thieves,—who she felt sure would enter at the unfastened window. Then I hastened down again; sat and thought a little; felt oppressed by the loneliness and silence of the place, which was only broken once or twice by the shouts of late revellers, as they crossed the green from one or other of the public-houses;

and next I began the letters, before writing which I knew I could not rest. First to Mr. Maddox ; short and business-like.

“SIR,

“It appears to me an impossibility to remain in this place, which is totally unsuited for a residence for ladies ; and therefore, I shall be glad to know at once upon what terms you will consent to let us go again, in a few days, or as soon as we can find another house. You must understand that we came here under the influence of a mistake, which caused us to believe that we should find everything very different to what it really is ; and consequently, I feel no doubt that you will readily accede to my request.

“Yours obediently,

“FLORENCE BRANDRETH.”

My next was to Mr. Robertson, with whom I now felt thoroughly out of charity ; and consequently, it was also short—and dignified.

"DEAR MR. ROBERTSON,

"We have arrived at the 'Retreat'; but as the place passes all description, I can only beg you to come and form your own opinion. Come soon, if you can, for I want to consult you before taking any steps in a certain matter; but if I do not see you shortly I must act without. We are indeed shut out from the gay and gossiping world, and Miss Prince feels our isolated situation keenly; but so long as we are only safe, I do not care for anything else. That, however, remains to be proved. Mr. Maddox received us, and I signed the agreement,—which I fancied you had signed before; otherwise, perhaps, I should not have come here! But do not fancy that I am ungrateful; for I am sincerely obliged for all the trouble you have taken on my account; and am only sorry that I cannot give you a more favourable report of our new—home!

"Yours sincerely,

"FLORENCE BRANDRETH."

I hoped this would shame him for his negligence or malice, or whatever it was that prompted him to place us, unsuspecting victims, in such an unpleasant position; and I vindictively anticipated the triumph of showing him our house. He could run down and return to London in the day; and seeing must be believing when he saw our miserable abode; so I determined that nothing should be touched until he came.

But it was now nearly midnight, the fire was out, and I was very cold and tired; so sealing and stamping my letters, I laid them on the *chiffonier* till morning, took up the remaining tall candlestick; peeped nervously round the room; tried all the bolts and locks to make sure that they were safe, and then crept up the narrow stairs to bed. I heard Betsy snoring as I passed her room, and finding Miss Prince's door unlatched, I looked in and found that she was also fast asleep. I was the only person awake and stirring in that lonely place, and my own room seemed

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full of ghostly shadows. A strange dread crept over me, and I looked fearfully into every corner; then I drew aside the blind of the front window, and gazed out into the night.

It was intensely cold and still. The pale moonlight slept upon the green, and beyond lay the white line of road, and the dark, mysterious woods. I do not deny that there was beauty in the scene; but still it made my blood curdle, and I heartily wished myself miles away—in some more civilized, if less romantic place. Had I been a wild cat or a fairy, or any other free and daring creature, I might have enjoyed disporting myself upon the green without; but as it was, I felt ill, and far from easy in my mind. The fire was out, and I shook from head to foot. A kind of half-faintness came over me, and I hurried into bed, but only to spring up again in a few moments under the impression that it was very damp. I had a light burning in my room, and so had Miss Prince; and at first I thought of going and telling her how very ill

I felt; for the excitement over, now my strength and energy began to fail. But second thoughts convinced me that she would be of no use in such an emergency; so wrapping myself in my dressing-gown, I lay down again, and commended my cause to God.

I really thought for some hours that I should have died, and the feeling that there was no one near to help me, was almost unbearable. The cold had seized upon my weakened frame, and I shook violently, spite of all my efforts to keep still. Moreover, the house abounded in mysterious sounds, and I kept fancying that some one was trying to get in. Then the room, pillows, &c., were so far from clean, that they offended my sensitive nerves; and altogether I passed a wretched night, though at length I slept the sleep of utter weariness, and did not rouse up till it was growing very late. Never mind; it was early enough to open my eyes again in such a dreary scene, and to such a very uncomfortable day.

CHAPTER II.

FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS AND IMPRESSIONS.

I ROSE in the morning feeling very weak and shaky, with icy limbs and burning head, and not at all refreshed by my night's *un*-rest. The recollection of the pain of mind and body which I had suffered depressed my spirits, and the thought that I might have to undergo this sort of thing for six whole months, and at the most dreary season of the year, too, weighed upon me like a night-mare. I was thankful that no nocturnal intruder had added to the

night's miseries, though whether we should leave the 'Retreat' without experiencing a visitation of the kind, appeared uncertain.

"Oh, that we had never ventured here!" I thought. "And how thankful I should be to escape again. Surely Mr. Maddox cannot be so ungenerous as to keep us prisoners here against our will. He must consent to let us go; and then—where shall we seek refuge afterwards?"

I considered the subject all the time I was dressing, and came to the conclusion that a southern sea-side town would be the most desirable at this cold season of the year; heartily wishing, when too late, that I had never been guided by Mr. Robertson's advice.

It was colder than ever, though the sun shone brightly upon woods, from whence crisp, red, and yellow leaves still floated down; and upon a tract of country, the beauties of which were at once tantalising and repellant,—tantalising from the enjoyment one might have had there under different cir-

cumstances, and repellant from their loneliness and gloom. Scarce a footstep pressed the frosted green before the house; though now and then an idle man, woman, or child, crossed it in front of my window, stopping a minute to stare inquisitively up, and then passing on upon their way. I looked out of the window at the other end of the room, which also commanded a view of fields, woods, and a scattered hut or two; but, save a wreath of smoke curling up into the keen air, no signs of life were visible, from the dip into the hollow to the rise upon the further side.

All was so lonely, that a feeling of desertion seemed to enter into my very soul; and the idea of passing six months there, with poor Miss Prince, and without any more congenial companion to cheer and help me, began to grow more and more oppressive. I went down stairs, and found that good lady (though she was far stronger than I, and I believe had slept soundly through all the horrors of the night), dismal and querulous

as ever; full of forebodings, and complaining terribly of Betsy. Betsy had done this—Betsy had not done the other thing—Betsy could not, or would not, understand any of her orders; and above all, Betsy would not bring in breakfast. So I adjourned to the kitchen, and presently set these matters right, shivering with cold as I encountered sundry icy draughts of air; whilst Miss Prince, seated comfortably by the fire, continued her fretful complaints, and looked as if she thought herself a very martyr to cruelty and treachery. In fact, I think she had half-convinced herself that I really enjoyed all this misery, and that my satisfaction in it was heightened by the sight of her discomfort; while I--what did I think? Possibly, that selfishness was a most hateful vice.

“I think I have taken cold somehow—and no wonder! My neck feels a little stiff, and I have sneezed twice this morning. I hope I am not going to be laid up. It would be so miserably inconvenient here, with no medical

attendance—no comforts of any kind at hand.”

Such were Miss Prince’s apprehensions; and I answered, sincerely,

“Indeed, I hope not. You must keep warm by the fire.”

“Yes, I know I ought to do; but one cannot take any proper care of one’s-self in such a place. What is Betsy doing now?”

Again her hand was on the bell; but I stopped her ringing by asking,

“Are we short of anything? I thought we were only waiting while the kettle boiled.”

“Well, dear, that depends upon how little one can do with. I don’t see any toast upon the table.”

“Oh, I had forgotten to tell her; and I don’t know that she is competent to make it, either; but I can.”

“No; let her. It is her place to do it. Pray don’t trouble yourself, Florence dear.”


Disregarding this last faint entreaty, I cut

some slices of bread, and toasted them upon the end of the knife, the warmth of the fire being really grateful to my frozen fingers. And it was pleasant, too, to be able to do away with one small grievance, though a host of others lay behind. Rising from my knees, I caught sight—first, of my own thin white face in the glass, and then of Miss Prince's, dark, well-to-do, and discontented; and I thought she might have helped me to bear my heavy burden of annoyances, instead of adding to its weight—and even assisted me more practically, without any injury to herself. But such a notion never seemed to enter her head; though she sometimes made a parade of pitying, and begging me not to exert myself too much.

Breakfast ended, I had an interview with the old lady from the neighbouring beer-house, who came to speak to me about the washing; but much as I wished to conciliate her, we could not agree about terms, for hers were very high; and in the end, she

told me, with a grand air of independence, "that she would rather sit with her hands before her, than take our washing at the price I offered," (I having mentioned the price we used to pay at Carlton). Mrs. Redfern was a decided character; and when she tripped into the room—a short, thin woman, with very short petticoats—I could hardly help fancying that she was a little fairy, or a witch; and when she flung away in indignation at my meanness, I almost expected to see her fly out on a broomstick. But I managed to make friends again, though the washing had to be sent to a woman three miles off, as there was literally no one nearer—and a great inconvenience this often proved.

Next, I had to send Betsy in search of a person, named by Mr. Maddox, who sold wood, as we had no chance of coal until the following morning; and whilst she was absent, I wrote a note to the coal merchant, at Blakeham, intending to post it myself at Stowington. This done, I turned round to



have a little conversation with Miss Prince, and told her about the two letters of the evening before.

“Oh, I am very glad you have written,” she exclaimed; with something like a faint gleam of hope. “And I only trust, dear, you may meet with some success.”

“Meanwhile,” I answered, “we will not unpack; for if our landlord refuses to accede to my request, when Mr. Robertson comes—and come he must—he cannot avoid offering to help us out of our present difficulty. The blunder was his own, so, if he has any gentlemanly feelings, he must help us to escape from the ‘Retreat.’ No one, with any right feeling, could do otherwise, when they saw two wretched women placed in so miserable and unsafe a situation.”

“Ah, dear, you may well say so. We cannot stay here, happen what may; for we are quite at the mercy of all our uncouth neighbours. But, to tell you the truth, I have little faith in Mr. Robertson’s good feelings.

He has so deceived us, not only with regard to the house itself, but also in the smallest matters; for did he not promise to order in coal, and have the garden put in order? And here we are shivering with cold, whilst he has thought no more about the matter. Oh, how I wish that we had never come."

"And so do I, with all my heart, but there is no use in talking about that now; only don't unpack until the answers to these letters come. If you do not feel inclined to walk with me to Stowington, sit here by the fire, and try to forget your annoyances till my return."

"Walk to Stowington! Impossible! I don't feel equal to anything of the kind, and I am sure it is not fit for you. Besides, I shall be left all alone."

"There will be Betsy," was my answer; "and I intend to be as quick as possible."

"But you look like a ghost already. Indeed you are not fit for such a walk, and it will very likely make you ill again. Moreover, Mr. Maddox said that that there were

no habitations all the way—nothing but woods and dreary commons—and I am sure it is not safe.”

“I cannot help that; for some one must go, and Betsy is so stupid about everything. I must speak to the baker, or we shall get no bread. The butcher lives somewhere else amongst the woods; so I must try to send a messenger to him.”

At this point, enter Betsy, out of breath, and full of tales about the loneliness of the country, and the difficulty she had had in finding her way.

“But at length,” she added, “I found the place, and told the man about the ’ood.” (So it pleased her to pronounce ‘wood!’) “and he said as how he’d bring it soon.”

“There, Florence, dear, you see,” exclaimed Miss Prince, as soon as Betsy was again dismissed, “even Betsy complains of the locality, so pray don’t think of venturing alone.”

“But she came back in safety, all the

same, and I doubt not that I shall fare as well," was my answer, as I left the room, being determined in this matter. I wrapped myself up very well, and once more descended to the sitting-room, where Miss Prince took quite an affecting leave of me, as though I were setting out upon some dangerous expedition.

"Good-bye!" I said, laughing gaily, and nodding to her, as I walked briskly down the garden path. "You had better spend the interval in praying for my safe return."

Miss Prince screamed a few remonstrances after me, and then shut the door hastily for fear of draughts, and locked and bolted it for fear of thieves. In the meantime, I unlocked the garden gate, locked it again when I had passed through, and hid the key on a nail amongst some bushes inside. Then I crossed the slip of common, and in a few moments gained the hard and frozen road. I stood, for a short time, to contemplate our elegant mansion; but the freezing air forbade my

lingering ; so, coughing a little, and breathing with difficulty, I wrapped my cloak closely round me, and proceeded on my way.

“ How beautiful the woods are ! ” was my first thought, as I walked along a white road, chequered with many a mazy bar of light and shadow, and gradually leading to a point where the trees almost closed in overhead. This part was damper and more gloomy, and at once suggested the reflection, “ What a road to be out upon at nightfall ! So lonely, there would be no chance of help if anything should happen. I wonder whether many robberies and deeds of violence are committed here ? ”

I confess that my courage began to fail, and I looked fearfully from side to side ; nor did I feel reassured, when I found myself opposite to the last house, — or, rather, hut, — upon my way, for the inmates struck me as persons not unlikely to take part in such acts as I was then imagining. Afterwards, I did actually hear that they were suspected of

stopping, robbing, and otherwise ill-treating the old carrier, one dark night, upon his return home from Blakeham; but, fortunately, I did not know this at the time, or I should have felt more nervous at the sight of the two bold, handsome girls, who not only came out to stare at the stranger lady, but shouted after me as I passed by; and at the vision of an ill-looking male countenance behind. However, their jeering salutation, although it might annoy, could do no harm, and I only walked on rather quicker.

Woods, dark woods,—still woods on either side, with impromptu paths worn into their recesses, and wild, rough, grassy lanes, winding out of sight amongst them, now and then. I began to feel tired, for the way seemed very long; but it was a relief not to have met a single human being until I gained a more open tract of country, when I met a tramp, who begged, and I felt half ashamed. I had provided some pence for such an emergency, however, and luckily, he

chose to be satisfied with them, and went on upon his way, stopping, at a short distance, though, to stare after me, as I hurried on; for, so I found out, when I turned nervously to ascertain whether he was out of reach. The road was still as lonely as before; though, thanks to the wide, open common, with its occasional clumps of trees, I could see much farther, and felt in less dread of a surprise; but the last half mile or so was all up hill, and the labour of ascending nearly tired me out. At length,—joyful sight!—I saw the roofs of distant houses, and once arrived at the outskirts of the village, I sat wearily down upon a bank to rest, wondering how I should ever get on,—or, worse still, home again. My limbs ached with fatigue; and yet I almost shook with cold, the consequence of slow circulation, produced by my weak state of health; for I suppose, under the same circumstances, a strong person would have easily got warm.

Presently, I walked on again, between

straggling lines of miserable houses; and it appeared to me that Stowington was the most forlorn, disreputable village I had ever seen. I counted nearly a dozen public-houses, with their rickety signs swinging out across the road, and learned afterwards that there were several more; the church itself being almost hid up a bye-lane, behind various buildings of the kind. These were speaking facts; and, moreover, almost every door-way was blocked up by insolent-looking men, tawdry, disreputable women (many of the last good-looking, in their brazen way!) and savage, half-clothed children. All stared rudely at the stranger, and some spoke to me; but I took no notice, passing steadily on, until I reached the village shop. I noticed a house in a garden, which I thought might be the Parsonage, and another which I concluded was the doctor's; but, besides these, I scarcely saw a decent dwelling,—all was dirt and wretchedness. Yet, I understood that the people—chair-makers and lace-

makers chiefly—received high wages, which they wasted in all sorts of reckless ways; and the neighbourhood, being thinly populated, there appeared to be scarcely any gentlemen, or persons of a superior class, to influence these miserable creatures for good. In short, the village of Stowington offered one of the saddest spectacles that I had ever seen, making me wish that I were rich and powerful. I had never dreamed before of such a savage scene in modern England—happy, civilized, enlightened England—and I began to dream again of what such a man as Percival Staunton might have effected here; and what I might have done, too, if aided by his sanction and advice. What had I lost by my imprudence?—ah, what had I not lost? The great power of doing good to others. And the wretched situation in which I was now placed, was the penalty of want of trust and indiscretion. Away, vain dreams! my hands were tied for ever now.

I arrived at the village shop, which was a

receptacle for the most miscellaneous stores. Flaunty bonnets, pearl head-dresses, and ribbons, decked the windows, intermixed with groceries, shoes, &c.; and within were jars of toffee and bull's-eye, loaves of bread, cheese, butter, sweeping-brushes, and I know not what besides, mingled together in the wildest confusion, the whole place being revoltingly unclean. Yet the proprietor was the baker from whom we were to have our bread, for there was no other within reach—a man of very common aspect, and independent manners; and two or three women or girls, with bold faces, tawdry dress, and ungracious speech, eyed me from head to foot, were very anxious to make me buy sundry lace articles, which I did not want at all; and, at length, were condescending enough to promise that the things I ordered and paid for should be sent, though when they could not tell; perhaps that day, or, if not, the next; and, also, that their cart should call regularly with bread. (Here I

may as well remark, that they occasionally forgot us, as did also the tipsy butcher, more frequently, so that we were sometimes left with scarcely any provisions in the house, and no place at hand from whence to procure them on an emergency). This business ended, and my letters posted, I began to retrace my steps, and then became fully aware how very tired I was. I could scarcely drag myself back again, and was utterly exhausted, and almost frozen, when I once more gained the gate of the "Retreat," insomuch that I could scarcely turn the key in the rusty lock. But I was thankful to have returned without misadventure. Weary as I was, however, I had to attend to the cooking of the dinner, which I was past eating ; and a glass of wine seemed the only thing that kept me alive, or that I could take, and enabled me to endure Miss Prince's endless questions. The rest of the day was a dreary blank, and the night as painful as before. I sat up late from utter nervousness ; and when in bed, kept starting

every moment, and dreaming unpleasant things between times ; so that, as before, my sleep was not refreshing.

Again a cold, bright morning, and a blank feeling as I looked around. It appeared impossible to make myself at home and settle down ; and when I thought of the long day and evening before me, I said to myself, " What am I to do ?" I could not read, and there was nothing to look forward to of any kind—not even the settling of our goods, and the cleaning and arranging of the house, for I had resolved that nothing should be touched until I heard from Messrs. Robertson and Maddox ; and besides, I felt so ill and languid that I could scarcely stir.

Directions to Betsy, and difficulties raised by her stupidity, filled up the early part of the morning, however, but not pleasantly ; then Miss Prince wasted an hour or two in fruitless complaints, and then the coal arrived, Betsy flying into the room most unceremoniously with the bill, and a very red face, exclaiming,

"Oh, he's such an impudent fellow that I won't go near him any more."

"Who is?" I inquired, with dignity.

"The man as brought the coal,—and he's got such a 'orrid black face, too. He asked me whether I had a young man to keep company with, and when I said 'no,' he said, 'then I could have him, if I liked.' Oh, I daren't go near him any more."

"Nonsense," I answered, disgusted by such vulgar folly. "However, you wait here, while I go and pay his bill."

And I began to count out the necessary sum. Betsy did not look quite satisfied with this arrangement—spite of her pretended fears—and added, in a loud aside,

"Hang him, though! If he would but wash his face, he would not be such a bad-looking fellow after all."

"Betsy!" cried Miss Prince, despairingly, and could literally say no more.

"Betsy, you must not use such odd expressions, and I hope you will try to behave

quietly and modestly," I added, "as so much depends upon your own behaviour."

"Yes, ma'am; I'm sure I always do," responded Betsy; "but I could not help his speaking to me as he did. I want none of his nonsense,—that I'm certain."

"Very well; and now I will go and send him away."

I accordingly walked out with great dignity, and found Betsy's friend peeping round the corner of the back door, in hopes of her return. On seeing me instead, he started, looking rather disconcerted, and trying to assume a deferential manner, which chiefly displayed itself in a low bow and a mild remark about the weather, to which I graciously responded. Then I saw him off the premises, and when sufficient time had elapsed, sent Betsy to bolt the back gates after her would-be admirer, in order that no others might find entrance. The sense of responsibility seemed to increase upon me hourly, and I did not at all enjoy my position

as head of our small household—particularly in this lawless place. Visions of strangers prowling about, and of Betsy's unsteadiness, tormented me, and I would have given much for a middle-aged and trustworthy servant in her place; but beset with difficulties as I was, how could such a treasure be obtained?

I thought of hiring a labourer to sleep in the loft above the wash-house, by way of a slight defence by night; but all the people in the neighbourhood appeared so very much the reverse of respectable, that I next reflected that such a remedy would, in all probability, be worse than the evil which it was meant to cure. Our guardian might rob the house himself, or, at least, make love to Betsy; so that plan of having some one within call in case of need, dropped through almost immediately.

Unsettled by this incident, I put on my hat and cloak, and endeavoured to form some better scheme, whilst pacing up and down the garden walks. Some rough men from the

little farm, attended by an equally rough, savage-looking dog, were leaning over the farm-yard gate, or shouting rudely to one another as they idled on the green. A woman or two passed from it, and stared in upon me over the low wall; and next some boys stationed themselves there altogether, making audible remarks; so as I was not in the humour to be made a sight of, I took refuge in the green-house, and began to contemplate the mouldy, drooping plants. We had remembered the stove on the preceding evening, but the icy air blew in through many a broken pane, marking its passage by a line of black and shrivelled stems. I was sorry to see such neglect and waste, and the following day I pasted sheets of paper over the vacant spaces, and moved some of the plants into a more favourable situation. To-day, however, I only looked round, and gathered one or two faded buds to take into the house, feeling too weak and pinched with cold, to stay longer away from the fire.

Then dinner, and another long, blank afternoon. I had none to write to even, for there was not one person in the world who I could now call my friend, or who would care to hear the details of my sad position ; so I took my work-box, and began to do a little mending.

In the evening we were alarmed by noisy drunken people shouting on the green ; and in the night I sprang to the floor with a start, having been awakened from sleep by a conviction that some one was attempting to enter by the unfastened window of my room. I believe it was only one of the slides of the greenhouse slipping back ; but the fright did me no good, and I stood a long time by the window, shivering, peeping out into the darkness, and wondering what I could do in case of an attack. There was an alarm-bell standing on a chest of drawers beside the bed, but if I attempted to ring it, who would hear ? I resolved, therefore, in case anyone attempted to get in, to convert it into a weapon of defence and brandish it about their ears. Yet

still, bad characters generally hunted in twos and threes, and I should be sure to get the worst of it at last. A cheering reflection this, and one that effectually prevented me from closing my eyes again till dawn. How I watched that window, as a cat might watch a mouse hole. And how very tired and faint I felt. It would have been a marvel if my head had not ached badly when I woke again; and the letters which roused me did not prove reviving.

There was one from Mr. Maddox, written as only an angry man, who is not a gentleman, can write. It was expressive of strong surprise and indignation at my very strange request, and enumerated all the expenses to which he had been put, in the way of advertisements, &c., before we came. However, he graciously informed me that, if I pleased, I might pay a quarter's rent and go at once, though even that would be exceedingly inconvenient, and he should be a considerable loser in the end. On no other terms could he consent to let his

tenants go. He would not even give us a week's grace, or three days, to settle where next to wander; and as to the quarter's rent, thanks to my inexperience, I was in debt already, and should have difficulty enough in getting clear and keeping the house from coming to a stand-still, as it was; so I could not possibly afford to lose so much. The rent was higher than I had been led to believe, and there was so many extras—rates, taxes, and other expenses—of which I had known nothing beforehand, that the place, if comfortable, would have been dear; and as it was, I thought it hard that I should have to pay a ruinous price to be made miserable. There was no one who could lend me any money—for Mr. Kennedy I would not ask, nor Mr. Robertson, and I could only turn with a faint hope of help—very faint indeed—to the second letter; but it was even more annoying than the first.

Mr. Robertson wrote in a playful, jocular

style, as if he thought the whole business most amusing, and himself by no means blameable. He assured me that his servant and the landlord had informed him that the "Retreat," was most comfortable and complete in every way, "in fact, as snug a little place as anyone could wish, and surely, Miss Florence, you are not sighing for a mansion, as that, at the price you offer, would be quite beyond your reach; and as for the rest, a little contrivance will soon set matters to rights; the fresh air and exercise will do you all the good imaginable, and I have no doubt you will survive the winter." Thus he wrote, with a cruel under-current of spite, which hurt me more than I can tell; for what had I done to merit such treatment at his hands? It was evident he was offended, because it was not in my power to express myself charmed with the "Retreat," and that he had no intention of helping us in any way, though, in conclusion he held out hopes of

"running down to see us shortly," after an engagement to shoot with a friend had been fulfilled.

"Defend me from my friends!" I cried, involuntarily; "This will, indeed, be a lesson to me for another time; and, but that I particularly wish to speak openly to Mr. Robertson,—once for all,—and to make him view the house with his own eyes, and then tell me what he really thinks, I should not care to see him more. As it is, he must come here, and I will give him no peace till he does."

As soon as I was dressed I answered both these letters; informing Mr. Robertson that I hoped he would not fail to come soon; and Mr. Maddox that "I supposed we must try to endure the 'Retreat' till our six months' imprisonment was over, as I could not spare so much money as he was pleased to demand," &c.—my last letter being that of an impatient girl.

After breakfast, Betsy was sent with these letters to Stowington, and I sat down to en-

dure Miss Prince's murmurs at my decision, till the gate-bell rang, and I went down the garden-walk in obedience to its summons. It was the baker, and at sight of his cart, an idea suddenly crossed my mind. This was Saturday, and I had been thinking,

"How shall we get to church to-morrow? And how shall we manage all the time that we are here?"

So, as I took the bread, I asked the two boys who were with the cart whether they thought their master could send it for us on Sundays, if we paid him for his trouble; we not being able to walk so far.

They stared at me, said they "didn't know," and then, looking at one another, shook with suppressed laughter, as if I had made some very absurd request.

"You will ask, though?" I next enquired; and they said they would, and so drove off, still laughing heartily.

The day and night dragged on, and Sunday came. I wondered whether the baker would

send his cart, and stood listening to the distant bells in the garden, ready to set out if it did appear. But the bells rang on, then stopped, and still no cart;—a disappointment, for I had set my mind on going; and it was then too late (even if I had been well enough), to walk. Consequently, I had to take off my bonnet and cloak again with a sigh, and settle down to read at home.

“How tiresome, when Betsy might have gone if I had but known.”

“Never mind,” said Miss Prince; “we can let her go this afternoon.”

“No, she cannot, for I mean to try to walk.”

Miss Prince endeavoured to dissuade me from the effort, but I was firm; so Betsy had to stay at home. As for Miss Prince herself, she never dreamed of walking so far, though she grumbled at being thus “cut off from all religious privileges;” but with regard to being left alone, her objection was not surprising, for it was a dreary place for one woman to be left alone in on a short winter’s afternoon.

Accordingly, having been informed by Betsy, who had made enquiries from Mrs. Redfern, that church began at three, I set out once more, in what I supposed to be good time, alone.

A long, cold, dreary walk; the monotony of which was slightly relieved when half over, by the sound of bells. I looked at my watch, and began to think it must be wrong, for I had certainly lost no time upon the way. I quickened my steps, but still, ere I reached the last up-hill quarter of a mile, the bells had ceased to ring; and I was so out of breath with my exertions that I was compelled to pause and rest. Then on again, through the lawless village, which seemed more noisy and repulsive than before; till, meeting a young woman who appeared rather more civilised than the rest of the community, I asked her at what time afternoon church began.

“At half-past two in winter, that the people who come from a distance may get home again in good time,” was the answer. “And in

the morning, it always begins at half-past ten."

I thanked her, and finding myself half an hour too late, thought it useless to proceed, as the church was still a good way off, and the short afternoon service would have been nearly concluded before I arrived ; so I turned back and it was well that I did, for as it was it became so dark before I could get home again that I hurried as fast as possible through the part overshadowed by trees, passed the one lone cottage where the two bold girls lived without a single glance, and returned to the "Retreat" breathless, and thoroughly chilled; insomuch that I could scarcely ring to be let in.

Such annoyances and discomfort may seem trivial to the reader who glances over these pages in a safe and comfortable home; for personal experience is required to teach us how very wretched we may be made by such. Here was I, ill, unhappy, nervous; with no society save that of Miss Prince,—who was by no means inclined to take the brightest view

of things at any time, and much less now—deprived of all those comforts which long use had rendered necessities; compelled to perform all sorts of rough household duties, for which both previous habits and the weak state of my health unfitted me; hemmed in by difficulties; angry, disappointed; and with nothing to break the monotony of existence, or prevent my mind from dwelling exclusively upon my own misfortunes. And it is wonderful how constant brooding over evils causes them to increase in magnitude, until our hearts are filled with bitterness, and we begin first to form, and then to cherish, schemes of retribution and revenge. It requires a truly Christian spirit to enable us to bear such evils meekly when shut up alone with them, and even the wise and good may sometimes undergo a sore struggle with their bad passions upon such occasions. What marvel then that I, who was neither very wise nor good, should for a time “give place to the devil”—of uncharitable feelings?

"Lor, ma'am!" exclaimed Betsy, "so you didn't get there after all! Well, I daresay Mrs. Redfern didn't know much about it, for she never goes to church at all."

"What!" I said. "She never goes to church?"

"No," replied Betsy, giggling. "She says she has no time. She can't get in the morning, and in the afternoon her husband wants his tea at four o'clock. But I don't think any of the people about here ever think of going, for the old lady at the farm said she had never been for seventeen years."

"And does no one,—no clergyman,—come near them?" I enquired.

"I fancy not. Mr. Willis don't seem to like coming among them, and they don't care a pin for him. They only make game of him, and all that sort of thing."

"How dreadful! Poor neglected creatures!" I ejaculated; and anger at my own troubles was at once changed into pity for their miserable state.

There they were—the inhabitants of this fine country—living like brutes amongst their woods and commons, and no one who might have saved them stretching forth a helping hand. Where were the clergy? Where the aristocracy of this most aristocratic of our English counties? Going their own way, and leaving these unhappy creatures to go theirs also, without counsel or rebuke; a torment to others, and a burden to themselves. No wonder that immorality and crime were prevalent in this lonely neighbourhood, or that the hamlet which I have mentioned somewhere before was the abode of filth and sickness; or that the unmarried daughter of the old woman who kept the farm upon our green always brought her child in her arms when she carried the milk to our gate.

“Oh, for a position in society! For wealth, energy, and influence!” I sighed, as I looked out upon the lonely green, with a broad, silver moon just peeping from behind the fir-tree tops, and shedding a flood of light upon the

turf. The deep shadows of the little nurseries of firs fell over it in parts, and behind lay the dark woods—darker, drearier, and more mysterious than ever. Yet what a happy change might have been effected here by any really good and influential person. Then the woods might have lost their terrors, and the neighbourhood its drear associations; the people might have been civilised and Christianised, and the benefactor who had wrought this, been happy in their love.

I began to dream; and, in imagination, saw a little church, standing picturesquely on the green, and heard the sound of its sweet bells swelling over hill and hollow. “Come to prayer! Come and worship God, amongst the noble works of His hands; His glorious woods, and wide-spreading commons!” And I beheld a throng of orderly and decently-clothed people—men, women, and little children—pressing in at its hospitable doors; rejoicing in their Sunday rest from care and toil, and eager to listen to the words of a

preacher who knew how to touch their hitherto stubborn hearts. But who was the preacher thus sowing the good seed in that wild uncultivated soil; enduring labour, sorrow, and often disappointment too, for the sake of the people whose interests were ever nearest to his heart? That I could not tell, for though I firmly believed (and still believe), that such good men exist, it had never been my lot to meet with any. All my acquaintance were so full of faults and imperfections. But who was the person that had sent the earnest clergyman, whom I saw in my vision, hither; and who I beheld listening, with eager eyes, and thoughtful countenance? Who, but him of whom I was ever thinking; yet, whom I might never meet again.

It was Percival who was to originate these reforms, living in a pleasant country house, built on the site now occupied by the miserable "Retreat." Percival! good, wise, and powerful; and I—suddenly I shuddered, for I thought, "This, and more, he might have

been; and who knows what harm my influence may have done? What if he has turned to evil ways himself? He, in heart and intellect so far above these wretched people. Yet, such things have been; and the greater the height from whence it took place, the more terrible the fall!" I clasped my hands, and prayed in agony that my faults might only be visited upon my own head, and that I might have strength given me to endure the penalty; whilst he might be kept good, and strong, and safe from evil; or, if he had gone astray, that he might speedily be brought back again to the right path.

Wonderful power of prayer! It calmed the wild storm within my heart; and, for the time, also banished all angry and anxious thoughts. Out of evil good was springing forth, for I was beginning to think more deeply than in former days, and in my loneliness and helplessness to lift up my heart to Him who alone could aid me in my trouble. I was learning to think of others—of their wants, sins, and

sorrows, and to long to do them good. True, I was still very imperfect, and many a long month and year passed over before I learned to subdue my wild passions, my follies, and my my selfish wishes, to yield up my will to that of others, instead of always determinedly going my own way. But everything on earth must have a beginning, and I had taken a turn for the better ; and was beginning to think seriously now.

CHAPTER III.

DISCOMFORT AND DISQUIETUDE.

I WAS in a softer and more patient mood that Sunday evening; forbearing and attentive to Miss Prince, and altogether resolved to do my best. I read the Bible, and thought about what I read; and then I lay upon the sofa, sometimes talking—at others lost in reverie. My present life was so strange, that even yet I could scarcely believe it to be a reality; but, on the contrary, almost expected to awake from it, as from a painful and fantastic dream.

Meantime, to look forward seemed to give me a strangely blank and dreary sensation, and I felt as if it were impossible to settle, or form any plan.

I was tired out in mind and body, and felt also that I was rapidly losing the ground I had gained at Rockmount; and what with standing in draughts, and over the kitchen fire to cook, and with my long walk to Stowington and back, I already experienced symptoms of a low, feverish cold; burning, throbbing temples, and weakness and pain in all my limbs. I had scarcely strength to sit up, and had I been in a comfortable civilised place, should have gone to bed very early; but the thought of the discomforts of the cold, dreary, barn-like room above, and the prospect of nocturnal visitants, deterred me; and I accordingly sat up watching as late as ever; lying down at length to be the prey of illness and nervous fears.

In the morning, though hardly fit to do so, I got up and had an interview with the old

carrier, who could neither read nor write, but was an honest man, and quite a character, and sent by him to Blakeham for some groceries and other matters. Then, unable to bear the uncleanness of the house any longer, I set Betsy to work to scrub and clean; telling her to begin in the rooms above, and next to take the kitchen and scullery in hand, leaving the sitting-rooms till the last—for I much wished Mr. Robertson to see them as they were.

All the rooms smoked terribly, and we were nearly choked; having but the alternative of being suffocated, or almost frozen, by sitting with open doors and windows at this inclement season of the year. The wind was rising, and the sky clouding over—I had no indoors occupation, and it was impossible to walk in the garden; so I shut myself up in the greenhouse for the greater part of the day, cutting off dead leaves, arranging, and otherwise attending to the plants, thus effecting a decided improvement in their state.

I certainly did not improve my cold, but I

managed to get over some hours by this means, only running in to attend to, and partake of dinner; and then returning to my occupation until it was almost dark.

I contemplated the result of my labours with satisfaction, and then went in to tea; satisfied with what I had done, yet paying for it afterwards, by an accession of cold and fatigue, which was not mitigated by smoky rooms and open windows.

Miss Prince, who had passed the day by the fire-side, in alternate fits of crochet-work and sleep, now roused herself for a good grumble in the dusk; and first she blamed my imprudence in staying out so long, and next she complained bitterly of smoky chimneys. The bitter resentment which I felt towards Mr. Robertson, and which my better feelings had only been able to lull for a short period, once more revived; and I answered vehemently,

“Well, if I am ill, it will be all his doing; for I must have some employment in this dis-

mal place, or else I shall literally die of *ennui*, if no more violent death."

"Oh, yes; I daresay we shall all be murdered, yet!" exclaimed Miss Prince.

"If I am, I will haunt him ever afterwards," I replied, laughing rather viciously. "That, at least, would be some slight consolation. The sight of his frightened face would be worth something; and as for the smoky chimneys, let us endure them till after Mr. Robertson has been; and afterwards, in case he will not help us to escape, we must send to Mr. Maddox. What a shame to let us such a house as this! How he must laugh to himself at having managed so successfully. Yes; Mr. Robertson must enjoy the smoke, for it adds greatly to the attractions of the 'Retreat.'"

But alas! for the success of my schemes. In the morning came a note from Mr. Robertson, announcing that he could not possibly come to see us at present, as he was obliged to go abroad, and might not return to England

till the spring. A few of his usual jocular remarks,—always with an undercurrent of spite,—and a rather condescending intimation that he was sending us a turkey and a brace of pheasants, which ‘he hoped we should find good;’ and the letter concluded by assuring me that he was ‘always sincerely mine.’ What a farce,—if it were not a mere form,—the beginnings and endings of our letters often are. Sincerely! Well, had his sincerity been proved!

“So he has slipped out of his promise altogether now, for he will never come near us whilst we remain at the ‘Retreat.’ Coward, to treat two wretched women thus! And his turkey and pheasants are, of course, intended as a slight *amende*. I wish he would keep his presents to himself. There is only one service which he can render us, and that it seems he will not do; therefore adieu to all hopes of escape. We must endure our six months’ imprisonment as best we may.”

That was indeed a black and cheerless day;

smoke and discomfort in-doors, storm without, and black and angry thoughts within my heart. Miss Prince full of grievances, Betsy apparently more stupid than ever, and myself so weak and helpless: truly it was miserable work.

I wrote a cold note of thanks to Mr. Robertson, in which I fear I allowed my real sentiments to be too plainly seen; and then I wrote to Mr. Maddox, begging him to send some one to the chimneys without delay; despatching my letters to Stowington by Betsy in the afternoon, for unless I either sent her all that way, or waited for the boy who brought letters in the mornings, I had no opportunity of getting them posted at all.

Then, I turned out all articles of furniture which offended my taste into the wash-house, and endeavoured to make the large sitting-room look more habitable; as for the smaller one, it was so excessively dingy and dirty that, except as a receptacle for boxes and

lumber, we never attempted to make use of it at all.

I tired myself with pushing about heavy chairs and sofas and tables, but there was no help for that; and next we had a grand scrubbing and brushing, and shaking of carpets, until the clouds of dust almost choked us, and seemed flying to the very skies. However, in the end we succeeded in making the place more clean and decent, by comparison—though there was plenty of room for improvement yet.

The week dragged on, varied only by three incidents, which I will presently relate; and my cold hung upon me, and made me feel unfit for anything, yet still I managed to attend to the cooking (making sad work at first, but gradually learning how to turn out a variety of simple dishes with some amount of skill), and to look after the poor plants, which I had taken under my especial care. And these last were certainly not ungrateful,

for though unpromising now, their fair flowers and sweet scent rewarded me in course of time. Some of course were unsatisfactory, and some died of cold, but the many lived and flourished ; and I might, if I pleased, point out to the reader that these plants were emblematic, but I prefer leaving him to form his own opinion in the course of his dealings with the world.

Miss Prince now and then sallied forth, carefully wrapped up, and took a few quick turns up and down the garden, but her time was principally occupied in crocheting innumerable anti-macassars, mats, and edgings, for some unknown object apparently, for though she often blamed me for wasting time, I could not see that her work was of any earthly use.

I attempted to play upon the jingling old piano, but the sounds produced were so discordant that I soon desisted ; then I tried to get some books from a circulating library at Blakeham, but failed, for the few of which it

boasted were the veriest old trashy novels in the world ; so in preference to trying them, I read the small number which we had brought with us again, and then came a dearth of literary food.

Now for the three incidents hinted at above. The first was the arrival of Mr. Robertson's hamper, which reached us at last by rather a circuitous route, having been passed on from one public-house to another until it arrived at Stowington, from whence it was finally brought back to the 'Retreat' by coach, with treble the lawful amount to pay. But though I knew this to be a gross imposition, I paid the five shillings demanded rather than come to a quarrel with our lawless neighbours, who seemed perfectly aware that "might makes right."

The second occurrence was the rush of Betsy into the sitting-room (the same day, I think), to say that there was a man begging, and that he had pushed his way "right into the house." Miss Prince looked frightened,

and I felt uncomfortable, but put a bold face on the matter. I took up a penny, and going out presented it to the man,—a great rough fellow with a thick stick, who was standing close by the kitchen door, and fortunately he took it and departed. Perhaps he did not know the number of inmates the house contained, or that they were only females, and was therefore afraid of venturing farther, but at any rate he was good enough to go; and I made Betsy bolt the back gate carefully, enquiring how it happened to be open. Of course she did not know; “he must have climbed over it, or the bolt must have slipped,” she said; but I secretly suspected her of leaving it unfastened for her own convenience, to facilitate a sly gossip with the neighbours, or what not.

Betsy, on subsequent occasions, did not prove entirely truthful, though on more than one she assured me, when remonstrated with, that “she had never been accounted a storier.”

Mrs. Redfern (whose good beer Miss Prince and Betsy diligently drank) had seen the tramp make his exit from her window, and sent me word by Betsy that if anything unpleasant should occur at any time, we had only to call out loudly, and she would be sure to come and help.

"Pleasant," I thought, "to be reduced to such extremities," and I rested worse than ever that night, and waking or sleeping imagined all sorts of horrible attacks upon the place.

Incident the third was the arrival of the clergyman of Stowington—Mr. Willis—who had somehow heard of us, and came to call; and who seemed like a vulgar, cross old man. He observed that it was a long way to our house, and that he very seldom walked so far; the scattered houses round us were, I think he said, in no one's parish, and the people a "bad lot,—a most disgraceful lot," who always gave him a great deal of trouble. Then he informed us that he should "always

be very happy to see us at church ;” and finally, he began to give such plain hints about his schools, or something of the kind, that I was obliged in self-defence to give him half-a-crown, which he took with a snatch of satisfaction, and pocketed forthwith. I could scarcely help laughing, and when I asked him out of politeness whether he would not take anything after his long walk, he answered, “ No, ma’am ; thank you. I make a point of never taking wine or spirits.”

Even Miss Prince was quite aghast ; whilst I laughed for some minutes after he was gone, hoping he would not trouble himself to call again. Truly the parson and his flock were well matched, and it was not strange that the manners and morals of Stowington were in such wild confusion. But though I could not help laughing at the time, it was in reality a matter of sorrow rather than of mirth.

On Sunday morning I resolved to make another effort to get to church (in accordance with Mr. Willis’s invitation), and I managed

to arrive there before the service had proceeded very far. The church and singing require no particular description, being of the ordinary village kind, and the sermon was just such a one as might have been expected. I was turning homewards when Mr. Willis caught me up, and presented me to his wife, — a common-place old lady, to whom I made talk for a few minutes till we reached the Parsonage, when they took leave of me without asking whether I would come in and rest. Perhaps it did not occur to them, or perhaps they thought it would be wrong on Sunday, but at any rate I did not choose to ask; and so walked home, very tired, and attended part of the way by a church-going rabble, whom I found extremely noisy, though their presence took off from the ordinary loneliness of the road.

I sent Betsy in the afternoon, and lay down upon the sofa, overtired, and feeling as if I could not make many more pilgrimages to Stowington. My cold was rapidly increas-

ing, and my work beginning to tell upon me,—not to mention anxiety and want of sleep, so, that when morning came I had to ‘give in, and leaving the house to take care of itself for once, to lie quite still and rest till afternoon. Quite still, did I say? That was a mistake, for Miss Prince was far too fidgety to allow me the luxury of perfect quiet, and I was obliged to tell her very plainly that I wished to be left entirely to myself, before I could induce her to go down. Then she departed in an affront, and being left to herself, what did she do next? One of Dr. Watts’ hymns informs us that “Satan finds some mischief still, for idle hands to do.” Accordingly she—but what her idle brains and fingers perpetrated will be better told in another chapter, as the consequence of her apparently insignificant actions was a new train of events, verifying the old adage quoted by Miss Edgeworth, “that the mother of mischief is no bigger than a midge’s wing.”

CHAPTER IV.

MISS PRINCE INVOKES THE ASSISTANCE OF A
DOCTOR.

WHEN I at length rose, I rang the bell twice without any result, for no one came, and when I rang it rather sharply for the third time, not Betsy, but Miss Prince, obeyed the summons.

“ You want something, Florence, dear?”

“ Yes, of course I do. I want hot water. Where is Betsy?”

"Oh," rather confusedly; "Betsy is just gone out on an errand for me, but she will not be very long."

"May I ask where she is gone?"

Miss Prince hesitated, and then replied

"Only to — Stowington. I wanted something, and I thought you would not require anything till her return."

"Pray say no more about it," I replied.

"You were quite right to send her anywhere you chose; only another time, please to tell me, for I may have letters to send. Fortunately, as it happened, I had none to-day."

"Oh, I am so sorry," exclaimed Miss Prince, bursting forth into a profusion of apologies, which I checked by saying—

"Never mind. And as for the hot water, since we are alone, I can easily go down and fetch it myself."

But Miss Prince was in an unusually active humour, and insisted upon waiting upon me herself.

"No, Florence, dear, you shall not stir. It

would only increase your cold. Sit still, and I will be your maid to-day."

I could scarcely help laughing at the exceeding condescension of her tone, for whilst I waited upon her constantly, she seemed to think it a great stretch of politeness to do anything 'menial,' for me; and a great exertion, too, judging by the time she took about it; but at length she returned, bearing in the hot water, and grumbling as usual about Betsy having done this, that, and the other. Then followed very particular enquiries as to the state of my health; Miss Prince informing me that I looked very ill, and ought to have medical advice at once.

"Oh, nonsense!" I answered. "I am only over-tired, and have a cold. I shall be as well as usual in a day or two. And if I did wish for advice, in this locality who is there I could see?"

An odd change came over Miss Prince's face as she answered hastily, and without looking at me, "There is Mr. Orme."

"The village doctor! Thank you, no!" was my reply; upon hearing which Miss Prince seemed strangely disconcerted, and muttering something about "seeing to the sitting room fire," left the room, and hurriedly went down stairs again. As she was often rather eccentric in her manners and movements, I did not pay any particular attention to her sudden exit, but with an inward feeling of relief, went languidly on with my dressing, until a ring at the gate-bell roused me from a rather desultory train of thought. I looked out and saw a person on horseback waiting there.

"Who can that be, I wonder?" said I to myself. "How tiresome—Betsy out, and I not dressed. I hope Miss Prince will condescend to go."

Yes; Miss Prince did mean to be so condescending, for at that very moment I heard her hastening up-stairs to fetch a shawl, and directly afterwards saw her proceeding, enveloped in it, down the walk. The stranger raised his hat, and a short conference ensued,

after which he rode across the green; and merely thinking to myself: "Ah, some mistake, perhaps; or some one enquiring their way," I dismissed the subject, and concluded my toilette.

In another quarter of an hour I had arranged my hair, which was of course still short, under a net, and put on my black dress, and then I was struck by the extreme paleness and thinness of my face.

"All my good looks are gone for ever!" I exclaimed, and yet, writing about myself now as coolly as I should write about another person, I must add that I do not think I was altogether right, for illness and trouble had bestowed an interest upon my face which almost made amends for the absence of its former healthy glow. My eyes gleamed too brightly from their caverns; but that unnatural brightness appeared to rivet the attention. And having thus commented upon my own appearance, I went slowly down the narrow stairs.

I opened the sitting room door, expecting

to find Miss Prince alone, but there to my surprise sat a tall young man, with dark hair, no whiskers, a fresh complexion, and a rather pert expression. Miss Prince was talking to him in a high-pitched voice, and I wondered that I had not heard her before opening the door; but I suppose that as I did not expect anything unusual, I was thinking of something else. I stopped short in utter bewilderment, and the stranger rose and bowed, whilst Miss Prince observed with a conscious air—

“Florence, dear, this—is Mr. Orme!”

“Oh,” I thought, “so this is why you sent Betsy to Stowington upon the sly. To fetch the doctor, whether I would or no. But this flimsy trick shall not avail.”

And I accordingly put on my haughtiest manner, and bowed as stiffly as a marble statue might have done.

Poor Mr. Orme looked extremely disconcerted, and puzzled too, for he saw that something was wrong, and did not know exactly what it was.

"I—I understood, Miss Brandreth, that you were ill," he said, "and wished to consult me about your health."

"I was not particularly well this morning," was my frigid answer, "for I had tired myself and caught a little cold; but I am better now, and had certainly no intention of troubling you about my trifling ailments."

Miss Prince drew in her breath, and rubbed her hands nervously together, and Mr. Orme stood the very picture of perplexity, grasping the back of the chair which he was offering to me. I really pitied him, for he was not to blame. Of course he had unsuspectingly obeyed Miss Prince's summons,—only to meet with incivility. I at once became ashamed of my rudeness, though I was still much displeased with Miss Prince, and forcing a smile I sat down, and bade Mr. Orme also seat himself again; saying,

"Excuse me, for I was taken by surprise."

Upon this Mr. Orme laughed, and sinking back into his chair, tried to look as if he felt at home. Rather unsuccessfully, however,

for his usual off-hand manner was strangely mingled with embarrassment.

"Oh, pray don't mention it," he said. "I was riding—that is, I should have been riding this way,—and it was no trouble to look in. I am sorry to understand from Miss Prince that you do not like this place. It is rather rough until you grow accustomed to it."

And he endeavoured to laugh again.

"I hate it," was my vehement reply.

"Yes," cried Miss Prince, "it was the very cruellest trick that anyone could play us," (she had already, I believe, told the whole history to Mr. Orme); "and poor Florence's health has consequently suffered sadly. You know it has, Florence dear; and that you were quite hysterical the evening we arrived. I assure you, Mr. Orme, I was in despair about her; and so—I wish she would just let you feel her pulse. I daresay you might give her something strengthening."

Once more I coloured with anger, and

flashed a defiant look upon Miss Prince,—the vividness of which was dimmed, however, by a haze of smoke; for the chimney was behaving worse than ever, and poor Mr. Orme kept coughing as if almost choked.

“I am very sorry that you should have had so much trouble and annoyance,” I said, pointedly, “but you must understand now how it happened. My health requires nothing but a little rest, and—what no doctor can give it,—freedom from anxiety.”

“Ah, yes; of course.”

“But since you are here, allow me to offer you a glass of wine.”

“No thank you.” And as I pressed the matter, Mr. Orme added hurriedly. “Indeed I am much obliged to you, but I had much rather not.”

“I am sorry that you should have to endure this dreadful smoke.”

“Oh, it does not signify. To me,—I mean, though it must be a dreadful bore for you. But,” hesitating, “will you not allow me to

try, Miss Brandreth, if I can do you any good?"

"No thank you," I answered, more good-humouredly. "You can do me no service, unless you try to cure the smoky chimney."

"Florence, dear!" exclaimed Miss Prince, reprovingly; and as if aware that she had made rather a muddle of her little scheme.

Mr. Orme looked as if he was half afraid of, and half puzzled by me, but as if he thought me infinitely superior to the inhabitants of the village and its environs, and therefore did not choose to be offended. So he answered,

"I wish I could, for I should be most happy to do anything to serve you, but I fear that would be beyond my power. Cannot Mr. Maddox be induced?"

"Oh, I have written to him, and have no doubt that he will send some one in time," I said.

"He is rather an unpleasant person to deal with. If I may say so, rather a screw."

“So I fancy ; and I shall be heartily glad when I see the last of his ill-omened cottage.”

Then the conversation turned to matters connected with the neighbourhood, which Mr. Orme was quite willing to abuse ; and in particular he lamented, poor man ! that the “county people” were so exclusive that there was literally no society. I remarked that he must find it very dull, and enquired what he thought of Mr. Willis, upon which he shrugged his shoulders, and readily launched forth into a variety of anecdotes, all tending to place that eccentric personage in a ridiculous point of view.

Though Mr. Orme was a person whom I had no desire to encourage too much, fancying that he might become rather too familiar after his first feelings of discomposure wore away, I felt that I owed him some amends for the inhospitable and uncourteous reception I had bestowed upon him ; and therefore I encouraged him to talk on till I really felt

amused. I laughed at his anecdotes, and the stiffness of our first meeting had entirely passed away, when Miss Prince,—weary of playing a secondary part,—observed, with her usual want of tact,

“But, Florence dear, you surely do not intend to let Mr. Orme go away without—”

“Without consulting me!” cried Mr. Orme, who now seemed wisely inclined to turn the whole matter into a joke. “I fear Miss Brandreth is inexorable.”

“Yes, I am indeed. And to tell you the truth, I have no faith in medicines now—I mean, of the ordinary kind; so that were I to consult any doctor, it would be a homœopath.”

“Good gracious, Florence dear! What are you saying?” cried the indignant and amazed Miss Prince.

Mr. Orme accepted the challenge, and enquiring “Why?” led me on to a long discussion of the subject; in which he denied, and I endeavoured to prove, that homœopathy was founded upon common sense.

Such was indeed my true opinion; for latterly I had lost all faith in doctors, and had begun to think that a too lavish use of drugs was most injurious, whilst the homœopathic principle appeared most reasonable.

"Why," exclaimed Mr. Orme, "you cannot pretend to believe that those little drops and globules can do any good?"

"Yes, I do; and the system more."

"Have you ever tried it?"

"No, she has not," put in Miss Prince.

"No; but I am acquainted with persons who have, and who have benefited by it too."

"Ah, that is quite a different thing," said Mr. Orme, shrugging his shoulders, and adding. "I would undertake to swallow a whole bottle full of these—violent poisons—at once, without doing myself any harm."

"Possibly," was my reply.

"Then you don't think that they can do you any harm?"

"I really do not know until I try."

“Well, if they can do no harm, they are equally unlikely to do any good.” And Mr. Orme looked quite triumphant. “Then these homœopathic—humbugs, put you on a kind of diet, I believe; milk and eggs, and all that kind of thing,—no matter what your constitution or complaint.”

“Ah, there indeed you are quite wrong,” I said, “for I have heard them tell people to take anything plain to which they had been accustomed, and even to recommend wine. They certainly object to coffee, and to spices; and quite right, I think.”

“Yet you have not proved much in their favour, for to my mind it seems that, setting aside the pretence of prescribing for you, these homœopathic gentry leave you exactly as you were before; which may be all very well when there is nothing the matter, but when there is something wrong—”

“Why, I would trust them still.”

“Ah, I see you are not to be convinced,” cried Mr. Orme.

“Not by a village practitioner like yourself,” I thought, but I only laughed; whilst Miss Prince once more interposed.

“But I am, I quite agree with you; and to prove it, I think—I shall consult you about myself; for I have not felt at all the thing of late.”

Mr. Orme bowed, but looked exceedingly amused; and his eyes accidentally meeting mine, we had both some difficulty in appearing as grave as the importance of the occasion required. However, the young doctor resumed his professional air, and, drawing his chair confidentially up to Miss Prince’s, he enquired, in a half whisper, what the symptoms were.

Miss Prince replied, that her appetite was bad, that she had a pain in her neck, that her knees ached, and that she felt shivery and out of sorts; in short, she favoured Mr. Orme with a whole string of fanciful complaints, to which he listened with due gravity.

"And what do you think it all proceeds from?" she enquired.

"What is your own opinion?" was the diplomatic answer.

"Oh, I think debility, and all this anxiety. A little tonic might do good."

"Exactly. I should say a little tonic; and I will send you one when I get home again."

Miss Prince now looked quite happy and important; quite consoled by the fortunate idea of substituting herself as a patient, in the stead of the obstinate girl, who persisted in rejecting Mr. Orme's advice; and she accordingly detained him some time longer, whilst she talked all sorts of trash about herself. But, at length, he rose to go.

"I will not fail to send your medicine by the boy who brings the letters, if morning will be time enough."

"Yes, perhaps that will do; at least, I suppose it must, as we have no servants to send on errands now." This last word being

uttered very pointedly, and with a sigh befitting Miss Prince's fallen fortunes. "I daresay you guess that we have been accustomed to something very different indeed."

"Of course; and I sincerely sympathise with you in your misfortunes," answered Mr. Orme, assuming an expression of concern, and looking, not at his patient, but at me. I laughed, however, instead of looking sentimental, and observed,

"I will try to keep Miss Prince alive till then; and mind you make her medicine tolerably nasty, as a punishment for giving you all this unnecessary trouble."

Miss Prince uttered some indignant exclamation, but no one took any notice of it, Mr. Orme gallantly saying, under cover of her voice,

"Trouble, Miss Brandreth! I am overpaid already."

I affected not to hear; but he continued, taking my hand,

"Pray be careful, for you do look anything

but strong. Do not over-tire yourself, or stand in draughts; and mind you take wine to strengthen you—in more than homœopathic doses.”

“Oh, of course,” I said. “Good-bye.”

And Miss Prince’s hand having been duly offered, and taken in turn, he departed in quest of his horse, which he had left at Mrs. Redfern’s; re-appearing, in a few moments, on the green.

Miss Prince began to praise him, and to scold me; but I was very stiff and cold at first, thinking it right to mark my sense of her impertinence, and to show her that I was not to be managed and treated like a child; but gradually I thawed, for this little incident had really roused and done me good, spite of the annoyance it at first occasioned.

Thus Mr. Orme obtained the *entrée* of our cottage, calling again, in a short time, to enquire how Miss Prince was going on;—a mere farce, for he knew that there was nothing the matter with her;—but he liked

to make good his footing in the 'Retreat.' And I, who would once have scarcely condescended to meet him upon equal terms, was now glad of any society to break the monotony of my existence, so I received him in a friendly manner, though, now and then, I was obliged to assume a dignified aspect, to check a slight tendency to over-familiarity, which I thought extremely objectionable, and which Miss Prince affected to find fault with also; though I believe, in her heart, she rather liked the freedom of his manners.

CHAPTER V.

SERVANTS, DOCTORS, AND OTHER EVILS.

WE yielded to, but were by no means reconciled to our destiny; and our Christmas at the 'Retreat' was the dreariest imaginable. I was far too unwell to attempt to venture to church again; and, indeed, only went there once more—in company with Miss Prince—before we left our forlorn abode.

Rude children, and young men and women shouted on the green, and then took to ring-

ing our gate-bell every minute; but we took no notice, and in time they went away. To ring a loud peal, and then run and hide, was a favourite amusement; and, at length, they cut the bell-wire, by way of a practical joke, so that people who came to the gate with parcels, &c., not being able to make us hear, took to throwing them over the wall into the garden, to save trouble; and it was a chance whether we found them or no. But, at length, I managed to mend the bell with a piece of string, and our neighbours were good enough to leave it so.

Then would come a loud ring, on a drizzling afternoon, just when Betsy happened to be gone to Stowington, and I was trying to get warm and comfortable by the fire; and, upon my throwing a shawl over my head, and going down the plashy walk, in obedience to the summons, I was generally greeted by such a speech as this,

“Here, missis, we want a stamp.”

And a penny was thrust towards me over

the gate; or a great uncouth man would advance with a sovereign in his hand, and say,

“Mr. Hoad” (the landlord of the public-house), “wants to know if you can give him change for this?”

I endeavoured to check these liberties; but in vain. In these instances no harm was meant; but in many others, mischief was decidedly intended. I began to think more and more of our neighbours, and, instead of resenting their rude ways, felt increasing pity for their ignorance, and a strong desire to help them, if I could. But how? I thought of inviting them in on Sunday evenings, and reading and explaining the Bible to them; but Miss Prince was afraid of admitting them, and I was too fearful of the experiment proving a failure—of becoming a subject of ridicule instead of respect, and of widening the breach between us, to attempt it after all. So we locked our doors and gates against them, and lived in a half state of siege instead.

Then I turned my attention to Betsy, who also proved most unsatisfactory ; for, though very ignorant, she was by no means so simple as I had at first imagined ; and she would persist in telling tiresome little stories, and in performing small acts of cunning, spite of all my efforts to create a reform. When I reproved her, she stood in stolid silence, as if she neither cared nor understood ; and when I spoke kindly, she was quite as sullen, though, at other times, she was always chattering and laughing, and professing her readiness to do anything I pleased. I could never inspire her with any real confidence, nor teach her to look upon me as a friend, instead of a hard mistress, whom it was her bounden duty to cheat and mortify, though I scarcely ever spoke sharply to her, and then not without good reason ; and though, when not in one of her hopelessly stupid, sullen moods, she was always ready to pounce upon me for a talk,—a freedom which I allowed for a twofold reason ; because I really hoped to do some

good at last, and because she had no one else to speak to in the house, and I fancied she must find it very dull.

I felt disgusted and disheartened. Everything was always in a muddle, for I could not prevail upon her to be clean and orderly. She was always dreadfully untidy, except when smartened up to go to church; and even then, though fine without, I knew that the freshness and neatness only lay upon the surface of her dress. Finery was one of her chief ideas of happiness; and when, in the spring, a ring of bright yellow crocuses displayed their flaunting hues round all the garden walks, she went into an ecstasy of delight, exclaiming,

“Oh, lor! How I should like a silk dress the colour of them flowers! It would look so grand with the sun shining on it, when I went to church.”

I looked to see whether she was serious or joking, and finding that she really meant what she said, could only heave a pity-

ing, half-contemptuous sigh, and remark that I thought that would be rather too gay; and that quieter colours would look better. But she was still unconvinced, and delighted in putting on every bit of finery which came within her reach—unconscious, I suppose, of any defect or deficiency, and labouring under the delusion that a smart dress would cover a multitude of sins.

Then her wastefulness was terrible. The half loaves of bread cut up and thrown aside, in order that she might get at the particular pieces that suited her fastidious taste, made me think Who ordered that the basket full of broken fragments should be carefully taken up, in order that nothing might be wasted; but let the preacher be as earnest as he might, this would be a hard doctrine to most servants, and I doubt whether any could be really convinced. I thought, "If I had a school, or could begin at the beginning, I might do a little good, perhaps, as I should try to teach all boys and girls this lesson.

And I would teach them, if possible, to be truthful, clean, and honest; those qualities being of far more importance, in my estimation, than fine penmanship or crochet-work. I would make them useful members of society, and teach them to have confidence in their masters and mistresses, and to respect themselves; for then, we might see a different race of servants springing up, but not before. There are faults enough on both sides, but it rests with the rich and well-informed, to make the first advances; and, by their judicious care and kindness, to dispel the mists of ignorance and prejudice. Oh, that I could make a beginning—but, unfortunately, I am helpless now.”

Yes, I was powerless to do much active good, though I continued my exertions in Betsy’s behalf all the time that she remained with us; and I trust that they were not entirely unavailing, though I certainly saw no outward signs of reformation. Yet, who knows? The seed might spring up, and bear

some fruit in after years. We must never give in, but do good for its own sake, and be thankful if the results are ever visible. And if not, we have at least the satisfaction of knowing that we have done our best. I should, however, have engaged a better servant if it had been possible; but tied fast, as I was, I could not hear of any; so Betsy continued to reign over the back regions at the "Retreat;" thumbing over the books in the sitting-room on the sly (for she had rather a literary turn), examining my drawers and boxes, I believe; telling contemptible stories; eating, drinking, and chattering; getting everything into confusion; and, in short, giving me as much extra trouble and anxiety as possible; whilst Miss Prince sat by the fire, and scolded her for half-an-hour at a time, without making any visible impression.

Servants (especially of the commoner kind), are indeed the curse of civilisation; and like mosquitoes, inflict a series of torments and annoyances, apparently trifling, when looked at

singly ; but, when frequently repeated, very hard to bear. They seem to have but four ideas—eating and drinking, putting on finery, prying into their masters' and mistresses' affairs, and gadding out to make love, for some one to "keep company" with is indispensable. But enough of them, or I shall never get on to more important matters.

Soon after Christmas, Mr. Robertson was obliging enough to write again,—this time from Brussels—to enquire "how we were getting on;" and, as may be imagined, I was not over-pleased with the tone of his note, which appeared impertinent in the extreme.

In the first heat of indignation, I read it aloud to Miss Prince ; but she was not clear-sighted enough to perceive all the petty insults and covert sneers concealed beneath a flimsy show of friendly interest ; and was decidedly of opinion that he was sorry for the past, and gradually "coming round" again.

"After all, dear, I don't believe he is a bad-hearted man, though for some time I did feel

very vexed with him. But this all comes of his being left so much to himself—or rather to certain evil influences, which are worse. If he had a good wife, now—” and Miss Prince smiled complacently to herself—“he might turn out quite a different character after all. I think you are too young and inexperienced to understand, or know how to manage him ; but a sensible woman might do much towards effecting a reform—far more than any girl.”

I was equally surprised and amused by this speech, for I thought I saw Miss Prince’s drift, and smiled to myself as I pictured Mr. Robertson’s dismay, could he but have guessed what was passing in her heart.

“Will you undertake him, then?” I asked. “I believe that you are half-inclined ; and I will make him over to you with all my heart.”

Upon this, my good governess looked modest, and exclaimed, quite nervously,

“I undertake him ! Florence dear, what could have put such a ridiculous thought into your head?”

"Your words confess that I was right."

"Oh dear, no; I shall confess nothing of the kind; though surely there is nothing so very odd—I mean, it is not strange that I should take some interest. In short, dear, you must understand my meaning."

"Oh, perfectly."

"Now, don't be silly. What I meant to say was this: I do believe there is a great deal of good in Mr. Robertson, and it was very good of him to write so kindly, after—"

"After what?" I interrupted, hastily.

"Oh, after—your unfortunate misunderstanding. Certainly, this is a miserable place; but it was your fault, for deciding on the country; and—"

"Oh, pray let me hear no more upon that subject. I had hoped that it was set at rest for ever," I exclaimed, turning away rather angrily.

Miss Prince at once looked penitent; and added,

"Well, you are right. What is done can-

not be undone ; and therefore, the less said about it the better. But, as I was saying, it was very kind of Mr. Robertson to write."

"Oh, very kind ! And such a charming letter, too."

"Why, what is the matter with it, dear ? He hopes that the fresh air has proved beneficial to your health, and that you are equal to that long walk now. No, you are not much better, and not equal to the walk ; but it was very good of him to think about it all the same. And he trusts that your next move may prove more satisfactory, and that you will tell him where you go. Now, to my mind, nothing could be kinder, for he would not have taken the trouble to write, unless he had felt really interested."

To this, I only answered, dryly,

"I fear that our opinions differ, and that his motives in writing may not have been so praiseworthy as you imagine."

"Really, Florence, you provoke me by your want of charity ; for when once you form a

prejudice, no earthly power can get it out of your head again. But I hope you don't mean to write as if you felt aggrieved."

"Probably I shall not write at all."

"But, my dear, it would be foolish to lose sight of Mr. Robertson entirely. Friends are not so numerous now that you can afford to cast one off to gratify uncharitable feelings. 'Forgive, and forget,' has always been my motto."

"Friends, indeed!" I answered bitterly. "Well may I say, 'Defend me from my friends!' And as to writing, I shall think about it, for there is no occasion to hurry. I may do, or I may not—just according to my inclination."

"Oh," began Miss Prince, "Pray please yourself; but if I, being somewhat older, might venture to advise —"

At this moment, however, the gate-bell rang, and she at once exchanged her argumentative air for a smile of pleasure, as Mr.

Orme entered, also with a smile of pleasure on his countenance.

"Well, ladies, how are you to-day?" he inquired. "I happened to be passing, and so I thought I would just look in upon you for a minute. Any better, Miss Brandreth? Have you taken any little globules lately?"

"No," I answered, laughing; "I am very well without."

"Well, you do seem better—brighter, I may say. I believe the air of the 'Retreat' agrees with you, spite of all the abuse you lavished on it, when I saw you first."

"Oh, I have no objection to the air; that is, the out of doors atmosphere, for as for that of the house itself, it savours too much of smoke to be agreeable to any one except an Irish peasant."

Mr. Orme laughed, and answered, in his most free and easy manner,

"Oh, I dare say; that's all very fine, but I believe you are growing quite fond of the

place, and will be sorry to leave it when your time is up."

"Well, if you choose to think so, I cannot help it," was my reply. "It is not worth while to undeceive you—particularly if the delusion makes you happy."

And thus we went on, talking nonsense; I from mere idleness, and Mr. Orme from mingled motives; but alas, Miss Prince was almost overlooked. Vainly she tried to edge a word in now and then, or to attract attention to her state of health, for Mr. Orme could only look at me, whilst he rattled on so fast that I found it quite impossible to stop his incessant flow of words. He rather amused me, for there was some real fun and quickness of perception mixed with the pertness which at times was apt to give offence, and how long he might have sat on chattering I knew not, had not Miss Prince suddenly aroused us by walking in rather a stately manner from the room. It was easy to see that something had offended her, and even Mr. Orme observed,

"I should think that good lady is inclined to be huffy. What is the matter with her now?"

I shook my head.

"Nay, I cannot tell, unless you have talked too fast to please her."

"But she seems glad to see me generally, and quite pleased to hear me talk."

"Ah, when you talk to *her*," I said.

Mr. Orme laughed.

"Then she expects too much, if she thinks all my attention is to be bestowed on her. That is not very likely, is it, Miss Brandreth, when an attractive young lady like yourself is present?"

I would not see his meaning glance; but evading this last question, I also rose, observing,

"Well, I think I had better wish you good morning, and go and see what is the matter."

"No, no," was the reply, "don't go. You had much better leave her to herself."

The pointed manner in which he spoke

annoyed, and convinced me that I must keep a strong line of demarcation drawn, if I did not desire to find myself upon terms of too great intimacy with the village doctor; so I said,

“No, I cannot stay longer now, for I have things to do, and you ought to be attending to your patients.”

“Oh, bother them! I had quite forgotten,” was the hasty and not over-refined reply, and Mr. Orme looked half “put out,” as he continued, “I must say good-bye, then, since you choose to turn me from the house.”

“Nay, do not accuse me of want of hospitality; for of course we are always glad to see you,” I observed.

“It is all that stupid Miss Prince’s doing,” cried the doctor.

I drew myself up a little, and answered, gravely,

“I cannot allow you to speak so of her. Good morning, Mr. Orme.”

He responded to my salutation rather

sulkily, and thus I dismissed him, and went upstairs in search of my offended governess.

Her door was shut, and when I knocked, I heard her making a rustling noise amongst papers, as if putting something hastily away. I knocked again, and after another minute had passed, was querulously told to "come in," upon which I entered, and found Miss Prince sitting at her little table, with a very discontented air, and wrapped in a shawl; for since the room possessed no fire-place, she could not, of course, have a fire. Before her lay a heap of collars and sleeves, which she was apparently mending; but her fingers were inky, and her blotting-book peeped forth from underneath, whilst an inkstand stood upon a corner of the table—from all of which signs I inferred that she had been employed, not in working, but in writing. But why this concealment? She was free to please herself with regard to her occupations, and I was not at all likely to ask to see her letter, if it was a letter, that had occupied her

till that moment. I stood silent, feeling as if my entrance were an intrusion, till she turned her head, exclaiming,

"Well, dear, what is it? I did not expect to be followed so soon, for I thought you were too well employed down stairs. Surely Mr. Orme is not yet gone?"

"Yes, he is; and I came to see if anything was the matter; for you left the room so suddenly."

"Matter! Oh, dear, no. There is nothing the matter. What should make you think so? I only thought I might as well come up and get on with some things that I wanted to do, as it appeared I was not wanted below, and it is dull work sitting with one's hands before one, not to mention the sad waste of time."

"But you were crocheting," I said, upon which poor Miss Prince reddened, answering hurriedly,

"Was I? Oh, so I was; but that is only idle work? whilst"—but here she paused,

and nervously turned over the collars and sleeves upon the table, thus implying the untruth that she dared not actually tell.

"Well," I exclaimed, growing tired of all this nonsense, "if I have offended you in any way, I assure you I am very sorry, and that it was quite unintentional. And now I will leave you in peace. Or—I think you had much better return to the fire, for I am going into the garden and greenhouse, and thus you will have the sitting-room entirely to yourself."

"It is certainly rather—I mean, not *rather*, cold up here; but pray, Florence, dear, do not disturb yourself on my account."

"Oh, I intended to go out a little, and meantime you can get on with your work or writing."

"Writing? What writing?" she asked, so nervously, that I felt puzzled and suspicious.

"I am sure I can't tell. You should know best," was my reply; and I left her before she had time to say more.

She was in a very indifferent humour during the remainder of the day, and I could not help wondering what tiresome little plot was brewing now, for poor Miss Prince seemed especially gifted with the art of getting into mischief upon all occasions; doing the things she ought not to have done, and saying the things that would have been far better left unsaid; throwing out dark hints, or fancying grievances, which existed solely in her own imagination, until—to use a common, but appropriate expression—she often kept me “in hot water.”

However, night came, and we retired to bed, and morning arrived, and we rose up again; the boy from Stowington appearing with some letters, just when we were dressing. At once I heard Miss Prince cautiously open her door, and whisper to Betsy, who happened to be upstairs,

“Here, just give him this, and tell him to mind and post it safely.”

"Betsy," I called out, "are there any letters for me?"

"She has not been to the boy yet," interposed Miss Prince. "Run down, child, at once. Don't keep him waiting."

But all the same, Betsy, who seemed to delight in thwarting Miss Prince, blundered into my room to ask,

"What was it you were pleased to say?"

"I inquired whether there were any letters. Is not that one in your hand?"

"Only one of Miss Prince's," answered Betsy, staring hard at the address, and after spelling it over with her lips, repeated, half-aloud, "Mr. Robertson."

"Well, go down to the gate, then; and make haste," I said; whilst Miss Prince kept impatiently calling to her to be quick, for the boy had rung twice already.

The letters were of no interest, but Miss Prince's mysterious conduct was; and I wondered why she had not told me that she meant to write. However, I thought she

could not possibly do any harm in this instance, for what could she say about herself, or me, except that we were leading the dullest and most uncomfortable of lives, and should be most thankful to take flight from the "Retreat?" So I would not condescend to question her; and after writing a few cold lines myself to Mr. Robertson, to counteract any false impressions that she might have given, I dismissed the subject from my mind, and it was soon apparently forgotten.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ALARM, AND A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

ANOTHER fortnight passed over,—oh, how wearily ! and I could only comfort myself by thinking,

“ Well, two months are gone, at least; and the days are lengthening. We shall drag out the term of our imprisonment in time.”

But it was slow and dreary work,—cooking, contending with small difficulties and annoyances, or reading one of my few books over for the third time, after trying one or two

works on gardening, an antique number of a serious magazine, and an old annual, full of trashy tales and poetry, which had been left by Mr. Maddox on a dusty shelf.

Tramps and beggars hovered round the place; and frequently asked for some refreshment, which we gave them at the gate; Mr. Orme called now and then, and was restored to favour by Miss Prince; there was a heavy fall of snow, which rendered our situation more forlorn and isolated than ever; and then a thaw, causing the water to be like a pond upon the green without our gate, thus cutting us off from the road; then high winds that shook the crazy chimneys, and prevented us from sleeping; a good deal of wet weather, and then a thunder-storm,—violent as such storms generally are at that cold season of the year.

Our neighbours did not improve in civility, and whenever Miss Prince and I ventured beyond the gate (which was not often), to take a short constitutional upon the road, we were

sure to be addressed in jeering terms. Then, we often found it difficult to get anything to eat, for the people were more independent than obliging ;—in short, had I kept a journal at that time, it would have been full of petty grievances ; for such incidents as those I have just recorded were the only ones that broke the monotony of our existence. It seemed so strange, too, never to get to church ; and altogether, I could not help counting the weeks which still lay between us and the fulfilment of our hopes ; exclaiming almost every evening,

“Thank goodness ! Another day is gone.”

Yet a pain would often pass through my heart as I said so ; a sorrowful, regretful pang ; for it seemed so unnatural and wrong to let the days slip by in total idleness, and my conscience reproached me with neglect ; though it was not my fault, but the force of circumstances. Oh, the misery of feeling that it was a part of my life that was passing from me in this aimless manner ; neither spent

in enjoyment, nor yet usefully employed ; for my hands were bound, and I could only sit and watch away the weary hours ; thinking, “ whither next ? ” or endeavouring to divert my thoughts by gardening a little, and attending to the greenhouse. My health was too delicate for me to exert myself much, however, and the long, long hours hung heavily on hand.

“ When it is warmer, I will try to make a sketch or two,” I said, listlessly turning over my portfolio, and feeling as if even that favourite occupation had lost its charm ; so spiritless do we become (that is, ordinary mortals, for I suppose great minds rise superior to circumstances, and create a world within themselves),—yes, so spiritless do we become, when our life is stagnant, aimless, and deprived of sympathy.

Then I turned to the jingling old piano, and endeavoured to play a well-known air ; but the sounds drawn forth were so discordant that they jarred upon every nerve, and

Miss l'rince stopped her ears in horror ; so that I was very soon obliged to remove my fingers from the discoloured notes.

At length, by way of diverting my increasing *ennui*, I began to note down some of the incidents of my life ; and after the first difficulties were got over, it was surprising how interesting my task became. Hour after hour was spent in writing, or musing by the fire, recalling many and many a vanished scene ; and though such a retrospection must always be productive of much pain, it nevertheless possesses a strange fascination ;—a something differing from, yet still, akin to pleasure. To weigh characters and actions, when time has removed the mists of prejudice from before our eyes ; to try our own conduct upon such and such occasions, and wonder whether,—if they could come over again, we should still do the same, or adopt a very different course ; to describe the places once so well-known, but which we may now never see more ; wandering in fancy through once familiar haunts,—

old houses, quiet gardens, country fields and lanes, and imagining that we inhale the air of breezy hills ;—and to write tenderly of, and pause mournfully over the faces of the dead, —who would not feel absorbed in such an occupation? But the saddest part of the task is to speak of those who loved, and are estranged. I do not know whether such an employment is good for one ; but this I do know, that it soon becomes most interesting, and sets us, “ thinking, thinking of the days that are no more ;” as some one sings in Tennyson’s “ Princess.” Now, I had an object when I rose, and something when night came to prevent me thinking of the driving rain and wind, and all the dismal nocturnal sounds of the “ Retreat.” My nervous fears were almost lulled to sleep, and I used to sit writing till a late hour ; whilst Miss Prince complained that I had grown very unsociable, thanks to all that scribbling. Of course she enquired what it was all about, and would have liked to see my MS. ; but that I scrupulously guarded from

her prying eyes, for it was far too sacred for them to look upon.

I now think I acted selfishly in suffering myself to be engrossed by any occupation to the exclusion of all sociability,—even when shut up with an uncongenial companion; but in those days I fear I thought most of what best suited my own convenience and comfort, and was not so mindful of the little charities and courtesies of daily life as I might have been. It is not occasional great actions, but the small kindly deeds of every-day existence that are of most importance, after all, and hence Miss Prince's just complaint.

Well, one night between ten and eleven, I was sitting writing, whilst Miss Prince sat by the fireside, more than half asleep, when there came a sharp, sudden peal at the gate-bell, and before it could be answered, a second and a still louder one. Down stairs lumbered Betsy, who usually went to bed early, but on this occasion happened to be up; and she was just removing the bar from the front door, in

order to obey the summons, when I flew from the sitting-room, and arrested her hand.

“Stay ; do not open the door until I know who it is so late.”

And accordingly, I ran upstairs, followed by her, to reconnoitre through an upper window. Betsy, full of curiosity, set down her light, rushed past me, and had drawn up the blind and opened the window, before I had time to stop her ; thus affording a good view of all within the room. I was following, when a loud shout was raised from without, which went through my nerves like an electric shock !

“Hoo ! Hoo ! Hoo ! Come out here, missis ! We want to speak to you a minute.”

“Oh, lor !” cried Betsy, recoiling a little ; “there’s a whole lot of them, and one or two are dancing in the garden !”

I approached, and saw a cluster of wild-looking men round the gate, and one or two who, as Betsy remarked, had “jumped right

over the wall!" My heart beat fast with mingled dread and indignation, and I drew back, just as a second shout was raised.

"Come out, missis! Just come out upon the green," from one.

"I say, mother, do you want a nice stuffed bird?" observed another; "for if you do, we have got one to sell."

And so on, till all once more united in a drunken chorus. I drew Betsy back, closed the window, drew down the blind, and took away the light; then I returned, and cautiously looked out again; my fears magnifying the danger, and suggesting an assault by drunken wretches on the house. But presently, finding no further notice was taken of their invitations to appear, they contented themselves with ringing the bell two or three times more, and then went off, howling and shouting as they crossed the green.

Up came Miss Prince, with a scared face, to enquire what was the matter; and encountered me leaving the room, still more

indignant at the helpless position which exposed us to such liberties, than alarmed, although I felt far from easy in my mind; whilst Betsy followed, more amused than frightened. In fact, though she always pretended to be very much afraid, I found that Betsy was really quite unconcerned about our lonely situation; otherwise, she would not have stayed out after dark when sent to Stowington, or have left the back door open till quite late. But I suppose persons in her class of life are accustomed to be left quite alone,—in woodland cottages, or solitary farms; and are therefore free from the nervous apprehensions which make ladies, similarly circumstanced, feel so thoroughly helpless and miserable.

Great was the consternation and disturbance caused in our small household by this nocturnal visitation. All the bolts and locks were carefully examined; the windows which possessed no fastenings ruefully regarded; and I, fancying the lawless disturbers of our

peace might return in the night, sat up till nearly two o'clock; and then dropped into bed, exhausted. Very weary did I feel in mind and body, when I rose again; and when down, I at once sent Betsy in to Mrs. Redfern to complain of what had happened; and to beg her (in case it was any of their doing) to remonstrate with her "company."

Presently, Betsy returned with an assurance that it was "none of Mrs. Redfern's company who had disturbed us, but the people going home from Mr. Hoad's," and that Mr. Redfern would enquire about the matter. Now we had made a point of "conciliating" Mrs. Redfern (as Mr. Maddox had advised us), by drinking her beer, and making her occasional small presents; and in return she was always very civil. So later in the day came further tidings, to the effect that she had discovered "who some of the parties was," and that they said they had only done it just to give the ladies "a rouse," upon their homeward way; upon which Mrs.

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Redfern authoritatively warned them not to repeat the offence, and sent word to us that we need not be afraid, for it would not happen any more.

We, however, did not feel so confident; dreaded walking out, and when night came, felt as fearful as before; hailing the arrival of Mr. Orme upon the following day. He had just been calling at the Redferns, who had told him what had happened; and he accordingly hastened to the "Retreat," to express his sympathy, and enquire whether he could be of any use.

"I will tell the village policeman to come over and speak to you," he said. "And I really do not think you need be at all alarmed, for it was only a practical joke on the part of the men; and now that it is beginning to be talked of they will keep more quiet."

"Oh, I daresay. But I hate to be startled and affronted by all sorts of lawless people," was my answer. "Here they were;—dancing and shouting like so many savages."

And I went into the garden to point out the exact scene of the occurrence.

"What! actually in the garden? Very annoying; and I assure you I feel for you, Miss Brandreth," said the sympathising doctor.

"Thank you,—I wish I only had a dog;—a good, large, savage one," was my reply. "Do you think that you could get me one?"

"I will try. Let me see," and Mr. Orme thought for a minute. "I think I know a person about twenty miles off, who might be able to oblige me in this matter. A man to whom I have been of service, and who would be glad to make some slight return."

"I would buy the dog, of course; if it was only to be had."

"Wait a bit, Miss Brandreth. We shall see. A dog would be a nice companion for you. Did you ever have one of your own before?"

"No; whilst my father was living, we had dogs about the house and stable-yard; but

my uncle—Mr. Kennedy,—objected to them, so we never ventured to have one in-doors at Carlton; only one or two large ones to guard the place.”

Unfortunately, my own words called up the most painful remembrances;—the howling of the dog by night, Thomas Markham’s terrible death, and all the misery that followed; and this, in the shaken state of my nerves, was more than I could bear. I shuddered, and placed my hands before my eyes. Mr. Orme was puzzled and alarmed.

“What is it, Miss Brandreth? Are you ill?” he enquired.

I could not answer at once; and in his anxiety, he laid his hand upon my arm, and repeated his questions with increasing interest. I drew my hands from my eyes, and looked up with a forced smile, preparing to reply. He almost started. “Oh, good Heavens, how pale you look!”

“Do I? But you would not think it wonderful, if you knew all.”

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"Why, what could excite you so strongly, then? We were merely talking about dogs."

"Yes, but the slightest touch will often waken the most painful chords."

"True," assented Mr. Orme, still puzzled.

"But it was not my doing, surely?"

"No, my own; let us walk up and down here a little, and I will tell you all;—if I can. I mean, about that dog, and that unhappy man. It was a terrible episode in my life, and I think there is no doubt that it brought about my uncle's death."

Mr. Orme gazed at me with ever-increasing interest; and so, not to keep him in suspense, as we paced slowly up and down the garden walks, I told my tale; which he only interrupted by occasional exclamations of surprise and horror; when it was ended.

"Yes, indeed; you have gone through a great deal," he said. "No wonder you are ill and nervous."

"Ah," I thought, "if you but knew all!

But the deepest trouble rests within my heart,
—untold.”

Just at this moment, Betsy went out to the gate—untidy, as usual; her cap awry, and her stockings down at heel; and returning in a minute, approached me to exclaim,

“Please, Miss Brandreth, there’s a man out there.”

“What! a beggar?” I asked, starting, I scarce knew why.

“I suppose so, though he doesn’t look like one.”

“Did he ring? I never heard the bell.”

“No; I saw him through the window.”

“Well; did you ask him what he wanted?”

“Yes; and he asked some questions about the road, and who lived here.”

“How impertinent!” cried Mr. Orme.

“I hope you did not tell him,” I observed
Betsy hesitated; then replied,

“Yes, ma’am, I did, though. But there

was no harm in it, was there? I didn't know as I was doing wrong."

"Very well; it can't be helped," I said, and Mr. Orme added, in rather a facetious tone,

"Indeed, Betsy, you are by no means a discreet young woman. I fear you would let all your mistress's affairs be known. But by the time you are as old as I am, you will perhaps grow wiser."

"Are you very wise, then, sir?" asked Betsy, pertly; and I had to check her with an admonitory "Hush!"—"Well, ma'am," she added, "then what am I to say?"

"To whom?"

"To the man out there. He's waiting."

"Waiting for what? I fancied he was gone."

"No, ma'am, I thought as I had told you. I asked him 'did he want anything and, should I ask the lady?' and he answered 'yes.' So what am I to do?"

“Take him a piece of bread and cheese, if he is hungry, and bid him go.” Accordingly, off went Betsy. “Tiresome girl!” I added; and then forgot the subject altogether; wandering back to my tales of Carlton life, which appeared very interesting to Mr. Orme.

But I was not suffered to get far in them that afternoon, for presently came back my tormentor with the information that the man was gone.

“He was peeping straight in through the gate, and saw you walking there. So I gave him the bread and cheese, and told him to be off about his business. And—oh, lor, ma’am, what do you think?”

“Well? Speak out.”

“Why, I feel sure that he’s—a gentleman!”

And Betsy opened her eyes as wide as possible. Mr. Orme ridiculed the notion, and I rather impatiently asked,

“Why?”

“Ah, because—he was shabbily dressed to

be sure,—but he did not look at all like a common working-man or beggar. And his hands were a great deal whiter than mine.”

“Possibly,” laughed Mr. Orme, as he cast his eyes on Betsy’s red, swelled paws. But she, no-wise abashed, continued,

“Yes, they were, indeed. As white as Miss Brandreth’s, and he walked off, quite proud like, across the green.”

“Did he take the bread and cheese?” enquired the doctor.

“Yes, he did, and thanked me; but I’m not sure that he didn’t throw it in amongst the fir-trees yonder.”

“That is exactly what a tramp would do,” said Mr. Orme.

“But he was a gentleman,” persisted Betsy.

“A journeyman tradesperson, perhaps,” said I, for the sake of saying something.

“Oh, no, ma’am! He was nothing of the kind. I know the difference between him and those sort of people very well.”

“Then how was it that you did not discover it at first?”

“Why—I don’t know. I suppose I never thought.”

“Well, you had better think another time before you insult gentlemen by offering them bread and cheese. And now, you may return into the house.”

Thus I dismissed Betsy, and we laughed a little over her strange notions of a “gentleman;” but all the same, I felt secretly uneasy;—full of apprehensions about the supposed gentleman’s real calling and intentions, and so fearful that he might have some sinister designs upon the house, that I could not rest until Mr. Orme promised to send the policeman to speak to me that evening; so slight an incident had power to terrify me now.

CHAPTER VII.

NERO.

THE rural policeman came, as he was desired, and hanging confidentially over the garden gate, held a long conversation with me about the unsatisfactory state of the neighbourhood ; declaring that the people were " the roughest lot he ever saw ; and he had seen a good deal in his time ; been a London policeman before he came down to Stowington ; " but that they " really quite astonished him ! "

Long did he linger, talking to me ; possibly

in the hope of some gratuity or refreshment being offered, to quicken his zeal in executing his duty ; but I—stupid that I was,—never divined his secret hopes, and at length merely dismissed him with a polite “good evening.” The consequences were, that I saw him no more until a certain catastrophe took him a second time—officially, to the “Retreat.”


Mr. Orme appeared again the following day, and told me, with the well-satisfied air of a man who is conscious of having exerted himself to the utmost on your behalf, that he had already written about the dog, and that he hoped to present it to me very soon. I thanked him warmly, upon which he exclaimed,

“Ah, what would you do without me, I wonder?”

The words, being spoken in a half jocular, yet meaning tone. Somehow, they annoyed me, and I made no answer, though one seemed to be expected ; but though I secretly reproached myself with ingratitude, I could not

help it, for there was a something that made me feel uneasy in the familiar friendliness of Mr. Orme's demeanour. It was evident that he now made himself quite at home with us; and he had certainly been most obliging upon more than one occasion; yet still, I should have preferred his keeping his distance, and I asked myself seriously whether I had given him undue encouragement. Not intentionally, was the answer; and so far I was better satisfied; though again I blamed Mr. Robertson as the cause of this dilemma, too; for had we never been sent to the "Retreat," we should never have been so situated as to have led us to repose confidence in the young doctor, and invoke his aid.

Mr. Orme appeared vexed by my coldness, and I saw his countenance change; moreover, the tone in which he proceeded to make enquiries as to the result of the policeman's visit, whether we had met with any new annoyance, and whether I felt pretty well, considering, was constrained and formal; but I




could not help it. I felt ashamed of myself without exactly knowing why; loth to seem cool and ungrateful, yet still more unwilling to be over-demonstrative and friendly; anxious to do what was right, and at the same time much perplexed as to how I ought to act; and therefore, I fancy that my manner was stiff and disagreeable in the extreme. Vainly Miss Prince sought to make amends; Mr. Orme looked more and more offended, and soon rose to go; I feeling exceedingly guilty and uncomfortable as I offered him my hand. His last glance seemed to say, reproachfully,

“And this then is the return for all my kindness,—my solicitude on your behalf!”

And the silent reproach cut me to the heart; for if there is a sin I hate, it is ingratitude. The poor man had been exerting himself to the utmost for my sake, and I treated him as if he had done me some great injury;—repaid his friendly interest with coldness!

It was not his fault that he had been bred up with different tastes and notions ; that he had associated with second or third-rate people, and taken his tone from them ; that he lacked refinement of ideas and manners, and was naturally rather pushing ; for, with regard to the latter failing, are not many persons of a higher class anxious to advance themselves by any possible means ? It was his nature to be forward, and the force of circumstances had rendered him even more so ; yet he was quick, and I think well-disposed withal.

Some days passed without our seeing him again ; but at length he once more made his appearance on the green, leading a large black dog by a chain. I saw the two from an upper window, and forgetting all the uneasy scruples and feelings which I have just been setting down above, rushed out, all eagerness, to unlock the gate. I was truly grateful for his kindness in complying with my wishes, and full of delight at the thought of possessing a sagacious animal that I could train to love,



obey,—and defend me, if necessity required; and consequently, received Mr. Orme with words and smiles of welcome. He, too, had recovered his good-humour, and now said triumphantly, pointing to his rough companion, who was straining to get free,

“Well, Miss Brandreth,—I have kept my word.”

“You have indeed. Oh, thank you so much. I shall now feel quite secure.”

“Yes; he is one of a good breed. Nearly a thorough-bred Newfoundland; and I only obtained him as a very particular favour to myself. Is he not a handsome fellow? You must promise never to give him away.”

“Give him away? Oh, not on any account,” was my enthusiastic reply, whilst I gazed admiringly upon the well-formed and powerful dog. “I am so much obliged, and shall never forget your kindness in remembering my wishes.”

Mr. Orme looked gratified, and remarked that my evident pleasure quite repaid him for

his trouble. He furthermore assured me that Nero was the best-tempered creature in the world, and full of life and spirits; but I had no doubt about his amiability, and was already making friends with my new pet. Miss Prince, meanwhile, with a shawl wrapped round her, stood in the porch, eyeing this addition to the family with anything but pleasant looks.

"Take care that he does not bite you," she exclaimed. "Those dogs are never very certain in their dispositions."

"Oh, he won't bite Miss Brandreth," cried the doctor, pointedly; "but with regard to other people, I dare make no promise. So, for fear of accidents, shall I provide him with a muzzle?"

"Yes, you had much better; unless you prefer taking him away again."

"What! And leave you to be robbed and murdered?" was the gay reply.

"Well, that would be better than being worried by a great ferocious animal like him;"

indicating Nero with a gesture of disgust. "At any rate, we have got over the worst of the winter; and since we have existed here so long without protection, I think we may manage to the end, without the assistance of any horrid dogs."

"You hear that, Miss Brandreth?" said the doctor, laughing. "Shall I take poor Nero back again?"

"Oh, not for worlds!" I answered, caressing the dog's shaggy head, and then taking possession of the chain. "Let me lead him into the house."

"But where do you intend to keep him?" was the next question, and Mr. Orme looked much amused. "You must remember he is rather too large for a lap-dog, and not being accustomed to ladies' society, he may give you some slight trouble just at first."

"Oh, never mind that; I shall soon break him in, and mean him to be always in the house—to guard it, and amuse me. I shall let him loose."


“Wait a little,” began Mr. Orme. “You must first make sure—”

But I had no time to listen to his observations; for Nero, though large and strong, had the undignified manners of a puppy, and now rushed headlong at the open door, dragging me after him by his chain. Miss Prince screamed and fled; Betsy, in the distance, raised her voice as well; Mr. Orme laughed merrily, and I, trying to restrain the too free motions of my new favourite, got the chain twisted round my fingers, and was almost thrown down in the door-way.

Mr. Orme ran to the rescue, looking half-amused and half-alarmed.

“Stay, Miss Brandreth, let me help you. He is quite too much for your small strength to manage.”

“Oh, nonsense; leave him to me,” was my reply. “He will soon learn to obey me when he finds I am his lawful mistress.” And I accordingly half led Nero, and was half dragged by him, through the house, out



into the yard beyond, and thus into the wash-house, where I tried to fasten his chain to an iron ring in the wall. Mr. Orme helped me, and the dog was apparently made fast; forthwith recommencing a great bouncing and straining to get loose. I patted and soothed him, but he still continued his endeavours; and the doctor, finding that I was so engrossed by Nero, that I could not think of him, took leave; promising to enquire after both of us upon the morrow.

Mr. Orme having departed, I gave my undivided attention to the dog, who seemed so unhappy fastened up, that, having first watched him devour a large basin of bread and milk, I resolved to set him free. No sooner thought of, than accomplished. Into the house he rushed like a whirlwind; overturned Betsy and a tray of glasses; then flying on into the sitting-room, he much discomposed Miss Prince; upon which I opened the door at the foot of the stairs, and called him up into my bedroom. Up he flew, half-

jumped through the window, upset a chair and water-jug, and tore the counterpane from the bed in half a minute; whilst I reasoned with and tried to soothe him; but for some time in vain. His wild spirits and untamed nature broke loose upon finding himself in a strange place, and I was thoroughly wearied out before the day was over; but at last I persuaded him to lie down quietly.

Miss Prince was in despair; Betsy half-pleased by his arrival, as something to help her to create a disturbance in the house, and half afraid of the extra trouble such an addition to the family might entail; so she alternately addressed him as "poor little dog," in a coaxing voice; and, "You great ugly, 'orrid creature," in a tone expressive of anything but admiration; but he seemed heedless alike of her caresses and repulses. I was the only person whom he seemed to mind at all, and he was not over-obedient even to me; but after some hours of hard work, I flattered myself that I had made a slight impression.

“And now, dear, you will think of nothing else,” exclaimed Miss Prince; and not entirely without reason, for the greater part of the day had been certainly given up to Nero. “Do sit down, or you will be quite ill again.”

“I will,” was my breathless answer, as, with crimson face, I sat down for a moment. “I will come down, if you don’t mind him in the sitting-room.”

Miss Prince did mind, however, so I managed to shut him up in the washhouse, whence loud howls issued, so soon as he was left alone. I flew back, and found him scratching and shaking vehemently at the door—once more soothed and patted him, gave him some milk and water, and returned to the house; the shaking and howling recommencing in a moment. Again I rose, much to the indignation of Miss Prince, who cried,

“Well, let him howl if he likes, till he is

tired. It is no use your making yourself a slave to the dog."

"No; but he seems so unhappy, and is strange at first, poor fellow. If I brought him in—"

"Well, please yourself, dear," was the angry interruption; "but if he comes here I must go upstairs. He is such a great, uncouth brute; and who ever heard of house dogs being brought into a sitting-room? If you mean to do any good with him, you ought to have him chained up in the yard."

I gave in, and sat down; but my thoughts were with the absent, and I was soon back at Nero's side again, who was certainly grateful for the attention. Thus the day passed over, and when night came I shut him up in the kitchen, where he howled incessantly, and thereby recalled another dreadful night. But I congratulated myself that the noise would be a warning to all evil-disposed persons not to come too near the house, and, for that

reason, his howls were music to my ears; though not to those of poor Miss Prince, whose feelings in the morning passed description, so that it is enough to say that I really began to think she meant to give me warning on the spot.

However, the storm passed over, and she learned to endure my dog in time; whilst he improved under my tuition, and I daily grew more fond of him. He ceased to howl at night, though his ways were always boisterous and impetuous; and when thwarted in his desires, he sometimes growled, and showed his teeth at Betsy and Miss Prince; much to the rage and terror of the latter. To me he was generally most caressing in his manners, though he turned rebellious now and then; but I conquered him by dint of firmness; and uncertain in temper as that breed of dogs is said to be, never in his most unruly moments did I feel the slightest fear upon my own account. His chain hung useless in the wash-house, and Mr. Orme was much amused to

see me leading Nero, when in an obstinate mood, by the ear, and to hear me speaking to him in authoritative tones.

“Why, Miss Brandreth, I never knew before how strong-minded you could be. You sound quite bold and masculine,” he said, on one occasion; “and as if you had nerve enough for anything.”

“Yes; it does not look well, I tell her,” exclaimed Miss Prince; but here she was interrupted by the unceremonious entrance of Nero through the open window, who at once precipitated an inkstand into her lap—upon which a fearful storm ensued; Mr. Orme glancing at me, and laughing furtively; whilst I felt bound to apologise, and offer the injured lady a new dress.

Poor Nero! He continued to do a great deal of mischief in the course of his sojourn at the ‘Retreat;’ and it was well that everything belonging to the place was so old and shabby, that nothing he did could make matters worse; or he certainly would have left

his mark more visible upon the place. As it was, he scratched off such paint as was left upon the doors, broke and damaged various small articles, and tore up the garden in his gambols. But I did not love him less. I—who so long had been pining for something to love, and which would attach itself to me—now felt the void in my heart, at least partially supplied. Nero was the companion of my walks, exciting many rude comments from our lawless neighbours, who asked me what I would “take for him,” &c. Nero flew up to wake me of a morning; and Nero lay at my feet or followed me about all day—for Miss Prince was obliged to endure him in the sitting-room. In fact, in the dearth of other interests, I became so wrapped up in my dog, and so ready to gratify his every whim, that, as Miss Prince remarked, I thought of little else.

“Nero is everything, and I am nothing to you now.”

And I think Mr. Orme gradually formed

the same opinion ; and half-repent-ed his good nature, when he found me so secure and happy in my favourite's society. But his gift could not be recalled.

CHAPTER VIII.

OUR APPREHENSIONS REALISED.

THUS a few more weeks passed over. Spring drew on ; the days lengthened, and what was of more importance, the dismal nights shortened, and the period of our emancipation slowly approached. It was now the middle of March ; and, thanks to my exertions, the greenhouse was now beginning to make some show. We had had some fine camelias, and geraniums, and fuschsias in bud ; together with other plants, which I cannot take the

trouble to name here; whilst the garden was perfumed by a profusion of the sweetest violets. We had also had some hyacinths, snowdrops, and other spring flowers; and the beech-woods were looking quite green again. Altogether, the country was losing somewhat of its dreary aspect—yet, under existing circumstances, I did not wish to pass the summer there; and still counted the weeks which divided us from freedom.

Nero was my chief solace, which will not seem surprising, when it is recollected that previous to his arrival Miss Prince was my only companion, and the village doctor our only visitor; so Nero barked, howled, gambolled, and tyrannised over the small household to his heart's content. The poor creature certainly pined for more exercise than he obtained, for I had a dread of stirring beyond our own domains; whilst he used every artifice to induce me to take him a long walk. Otherwise, he seemed perfectly contented with his quarters.

Remembering the past, I took quite a misanthropic pleasure in thinking more highly of Nero, than of beings who are ordinarily placed first in the ranks of creation—in raising the soulless, but intelligent and faithful dog, above his more pretentious master—man. The dog's faults were made light of, and his virtues exaggerated; whilst, on the other hand, I took no lenient view of the shortcomings of our fallen nature, but always expected much good, and found little there.

Mr. Orme watched me with a mixture of amusement and annoyance; saying,

“That dog is too much for you, Miss Brandreth. He requires something more than female guidance, particularly since you always have him loose.”

And Miss Prince echoed back his words; but I asserted that he was not at all too much for me—that he was the comfort of my life—and that I could manage him perfectly well; upon which, significant looks were apt to be exchanged. For those, however, I cared

little, and devoted myself still more to Nero, out of very contradiction; exulting in his affection, whilst (I grieve to say it), I rather encouraged him in rudeness to anybody else.

Therefore, it so happened that Miss Prince, having been tempted into the garden one bright afternoon, presently met Nero parading round and round it, with a slipper—her property—in his mouth. Vainly she tried to rescue it, for he first flew round the walks, then tossed it up in the air and caught it again in the most defiant manner, and then, taking advantage of her fears, began to growl. At first I laughed, but perceiving she was growing angry, I made him yield up his prey, and restored it to the offended owner; trusting thus to reinstate myself in her good graces. But Nero was not to be so easily managed, and forthwith commenced a series of springs and barks, while he endeavoured to repossess himself of the slipper.

Miss Prince now professed herself seriously frightened, and began to hurry toward the

house; but the great rough Newfoundland dog sprang before her, and still barred her path; jumping upon her half in play, and half in spite, until I seized him by the throat and held him back; not, however, before he had torn a great hole in her shawl. Great was her indignation at this climax, and no apologies of mine could make amends. She fled into the house, and banged the door; leaving me to amuse myself with Nero in the garden, whilst she retired to her own room to mend her shawl.

I am sorry to say I did not take her sudden exit much to heart; but stayed gathering violets, clipping dead leaves off the plants in the greenhouse, and playing with the dog till I felt tired; and then I went into the sitting-room. There lay a letter, which I had been wanting to send to the post, but had forgotten; so I summoned Betsy, and bade her put on her bonnet and shawl at once, whilst I sat down to arrange my flowers in water. Betsy despatched to Stowington, I began to

note down a few trifling incidents, chiefly connected with Nero, in my journal ; but Nero himself interrupted me, and was so overplayful at the wrong time, that at length I shut him into the passage, and bade him lie down at the door. A few whines and scratches, and then he subsided, and fell asleep upon the mat ; whilst I went on writing at the centre table, with the window open, and my shoulder turned towards it ; my thoughts being busy with the page before me.

Presently a slight noise aroused me, and looking up, I saw a most repulsive tramp leaning through the open window, whilst a second stood a little way behind him. My watch and chain lay on the table, and my purse, from which I had just taken money for Betsy to buy stamps with, close beside—a tempting spectacle to gentlemen of that fraternity.

“ Please missis,” began the first tramp, in a half whining, half menacing tone, “ have you anything to give to a poor fellow out of work ?”

And I saw his eyes fix greedily upon the watch whilst he was speaking, whilst his comrade thrust his head in too. I was thoroughly startled, and replying,

“I will see,” I instinctively sprang towards the door; but, in a moment, one man stood within the room, and with a cry of “No, no, just stop where you are!” attempted to arrest my progress. Fortunately, however, my hand was already upon the lock of the door; and calling to Nero, who had roused himself, and was beginning to bark at the unwonted noise, I admitted him, and with one bound, he was at the first intruder’s throat. The man uttered a loud howl of rage and terror, whilst the second swore horribly, and bade me “take that devil off, or he would murder me;” but these threatening words, instead of inducing obedience, only made me depend the more upon Nero as my only stay.

“Hold him fast!” I cried, and once more made for the door, with the intention of

locking it on the outside, whilst I called for help.

Upon this, tramp the second, after assaulting the dog with his thick stick, threw aside that weapon of offence and defence, and drawing forth a clasp knife, rushed to the rescue of his struggling fellow. The sight appeared to paralyze me, and I quite forgot to fly ; whilst once, twice, thrice, with frightful rapidity, the blade was plunged into my favourite's side. He made one last effort to avenge himself, then relaxing his hold, fell back upon the floor with a low howl ; and I was left unprotected, at the mercy of these horrible intruders, who were now incensed beyond expression.

Miss Prince, hearing the noise, locked her door (as I afterwards learned), and then, throwing open the window, screamed loudly for assistance.

" Help ! help ! thieves ! " she kept repeating, as loudly as she could.

Meantime, my situation had become most

critical; but I was so absorbed by anger and horror at the fate of my poor Nero, that I quite forgot my own danger, and was confronting my adversaries with flashing eyes, and I know not what wild words, whilst they turned upon me in the most ominous manner; when, suddenly, a well-known voice was heard without.

“Holloa! what is the matter there?”

One of the men rushed through the window instantly; the other stopped to aim a blow at my head, but fortunately missed, and then followed his companion, turning to shake his stick at me, and utter a few oaths and threats, before he fled from Mr. Orme, who hearing Miss Prince’s cries, had lost no time in hastening to the rescue. Happy, indeed, it was for us that he chanced to be passing by at that particular moment, or this history would, in all probability, never have been written.

He sprang in at the open window, exclaiming,

“Good heavens! what has happened? Are you hurt?”

I was already on my knees beside poor Nero, who turned his glazing eyes lovingly upon his mistress; and whilst struggling to rise and lick my hand, fell back again with a long, low howl, and died. I bent down and kissed the poor dog's head, thinking only of him; and the doctor had to repeat his questions before he met with any answer. Then I raised myself, and said,

“No, Nero is the only victim. Quick! Pursue his murderers! Do not let them get away!”

“But—” began Mr. Orme, only to be interrupted by me, as I rose from the floor, with blood-stained garments.

“Oh, lose no time. I would give anything to have them hanged!”

And I spoke truly, for at that moment, all revengeful feelings were boiling in my breast. Mr. Orme took the hint, and speedily made his exit by the window; but the minute or

two already lost made every difference. The tramps had made for the woods, and it was impossible to overtake them at once, so, after making enquiries from the one or two men whom he found loitering about, and bidding them join the quest, Mr. Orme returned to me, and found me once more kneeling on the floor. Tears of passionate grief were falling from my eyes upon the stiffening form of Nero, whilst my thoughts all turned on vengeance; so that my first words were,

“Have you found them?”

“No.”

“Then why did you return?” I asked, reproachfully.

“To make sure that you were safe.”

“Nonsense! you should have gone on till you overtook them; but since you choose to come back, try to help me in another way. Tell me,—for you ought to know,—whether this poor dog is quite dead. Can you save it? I should be everlastingly grateful if you could.”

I spoke wildly, and at the same time authoritatively, as if I had a right to command the doctor's services in any way; but he seemed to take it all as a matter of course, and casting one compassionate glance upon me, knelt down to examine the poor animal upon the floor. He lifted its paws, and laid his hand upon its heart—looked at the ghastly wounds in its side, and shook his head.

"My dear Miss Brandreth, I can do nothing here," he said, "your dog is dead; and all that I can do for you is to use every endeavour to bring the brutes who destroyed him to justice. Poor Nero! So he died defending you?"

My only answer was another burst of tears; and Mr. Orme laid his hand soothingly upon mine, saying, as if prompted by an irresistible feeling of compassion and interest:

"Dearest Miss Brandreth, do not give way so. Tell me how it happened."

His words seemed to give me new powers

of endurance; and, springing up, I answered, vehemently,

“No, this is no time for a childish indulgence of unavailing sorrow. My dear dog is dead—cruelly murdered!—and all that remains for me is vengeance on the cowards who did the deed. Go, at once, and find them. There were two. They entered by this window whilst I was writing. You can guess the rest.”

“I can; but I dare not leave you alone. Where are your servant and Miss Prince?”

“Betsy is gone to Stowington. Miss Prince is safe upstairs, and dare not venture down,” was my contemptuous answer. “And, yet, I might be dead for aught she knows!”

Mr. Orme muttered something uncomplimentary, and opening the door at the foot of the stairs, called loudly,

“Come, Miss Prince! It is time you came to see if anything was wanted.”

No reply. He took upon himself to ascend the stairs, and call again.

"Miss Prince, you are wanted; so make haste, for I have no time to lose."

All was silence still; and then he began to swear, as he rushed along the passage, and shook her door.

"Miss Prince, surely you must hear! Come out at once."

Then a tremulous voice within enquired,

"Who is it? Only Mr. Orme?"

"Yes, all is safe; but do be quick. Unlock your door."

Upon, this, the key turned cautiously, and Miss Prince opened an inch of the door, and peeped out into the passage.

"Are they all gone? Where is poor dear Florence? Not much hurt, I hope?"

"Gone?—yes; but no thanks to you. I wonder that you did not show more feeling. But come to Miss Brandreth now, whilst I go in search of them. I have no time to lose."

So spoke Mr. Orme, rudely enough, upon the impulse of the moment. Miss Prince still

hung back, half angry, and half frightened by his vehemence.

“Oh, it gave me such a shock! That dreadful noise below. You are not going again? Pray do not leave us; stay here, or indeed I dare not come down.”

“Then stay where you are,” was the abrupt response. “Miss Brandreth, you can take care of yourself till my return.”

I had followed to beg him to make haste, and now responded,

“Oh, yes; there is no chance of their returning now. I almost wish there was.”

“No, you are safe enough for the present, I believe. Just bolt the doors and windows though, and then lie down. Have you any brandy in the house?”

We always kept a little in case of illness, so I answered that there was.

“Then bring it here.”

I brought it, and Mr. Orme, seizing a decanter of water, mixed me a strong dose, and made me drink it too, before he left; nor

was the precaution unnecessary, for the excitement over, I was already turning faint and giddy. I may as well remark here, that Miss Prince had recourse to the same medicine when she at length came down, and bestowed much pity on her own shaken nerves.

Mr. Orme then hastily left the house, and *en route* stopped at the Redferns, and sent Mrs. Redfern to our assistance. Then, mounting his horse, he sped on to Stowington, doing his devoir, village doctor though he was, like a gallant knight and true.

Miss Prince who had seen nothing of the affray, meanwhile told the history of it with embellishments to Mrs. Redfern, who afterwards spread the most distorted accounts abroad, until the neighbourhood believed all sorts of frightful catastrophes had happened, and flocked in crowds to the green, to stare open-mouthed at our unlucky cottage. Betsy heard the rumour of it in the village, and flew back in haste, under the impression that

at least one of us was murdered, to feast her eyes upon the sight—vulgar curiosity far predominating over fear; and as for any real feeling on the subject—why, her nature was far too stolid to harbour such, though I suppose, if occasion had required, she could have got up a noisy show of sympathy with our misfortunes. But, as it happened, there was only the fate of Nero to lament. I could not bear to see and hear this folly, so, to fill up time, I made her and Mrs. Redfern help me to carry the poor dog out into the garden, where I meant to have him buried, and then I went upstairs into my own room for the sake of quiet, whilst the two below chattered on till Mr. Orme's return. Miss Prince I believe rather rejoiced in Nero's untimely end, for she had always regarded him as an enemy, and was still burning with resentment towards the poor brute for the fright he had given her, and the injuries he had inflicted on her shawl that afternoon.

“Well,” she exclaimed, “he won't torment

us any more, at any rate. It is very well that they did not kill you instead, Florence, dear; this is just what I expected all along."

"Yes, they would probably have killed me, but for Nero. And yet you are glad!"

I stopped short, for I could say no more.

"Glad! Oh, dear, no. I am sure I am very sorry—particularly for your sake, dear; though the mistake was in ever coming to this place. But we cannot stay here another day."

"We will talk of that presently," was my reply; and it was at this point that I retired upstairs—angry, vengeful, and excited; nor did I once remember to be thankful for my preservation. Not one word of gratitude to God rose to my lips, and not one momentary feeling on the subject filled my heart, so absorbed was I by thoughts of Nero, and resentment towards the disturbers of my happiness. Thus the time was occupied till Mr. Orme came back.

He had set the Stowington policemen on

the track, and ordered one to come and guard the "Retreat" at night, whilst the other scoured the country in search of the two miscreants; and now he was about to proceed to Blakeham, to give notice of this outrage to the authorities there. I felt very grateful for his kindness, and said so; but he laughed, and answered that he was only too happy to serve me in any possible way. I thought if he had not been passing the 'Retreat' so opportunely, I might have even then been lying stiff and cold, like Nero, and told him my opinion, upon which he shuddered, and owned that it was most fortunate that he happened to be near.

"How shall I ever prove my gratitude?" I said. "I was so much excited when you were here before, that I fear I must have seemed rather rude."

"Oh, never mind that, now," he interposed. "Rest yourself, and I will tell you afterwards how it may be repaid."

Thus saying, he fixed his eyes in a peculiar

manner on my face, but his meaning was a mystery which I was far too pre-occupied at the time to seek to fathom. He perceived this, and continued,

“Well, we must bury that poor dog. Don’t fret about him, Miss Brandreth; he has done his duty, and while he lived he had a happy home.” Mr. Orme paused, then added, with rather a forced laugh — an attempt at gaiety which jarred painfully upon my feelings, “You know they say ‘A short life and a merry one,’ and Nero’s was a merry, independent one, I am sure.” A pause, and then, a little more gravely, “I have spoken to a man to come and dig his grave—poor fellow!”

I could not repress my sobs, whilst Miss Prince fidgeted, and talked at random. Mr. Orme was deaf to all she said, but bestowed the most marked attention on me, and by-and-bye, when I was able to control myself, we went out into the garden and saw the dog laid to rest beneath a tree. I felt as if I

had lost a dear friend ; and when I thought of the events of a few short hours before—Nero's gambles, and Miss Prince's indignation—the suddenness of the catastrophe almost overwhelmed me again, and I scarcely knew how I got back into the house. Mrs. Redfern was dismissed, and Betsy sent into the kitchen, Miss Prince warned not to talk, and I laid upon the sofa, and covered with a shawl ; and then, off went the indefatigable Mr. Orme again. It was impossible not to admire his energy and zeal ; and if “his manners had not the repose which stamps the house of Vere de Vere,” he at least possessed a warm heart and an active mind, and those make amends for much—nay, cover a multitude of sins.

After his departure we had tea, and about eight o'clock the policeman arrived upon the scene. I went and talked to him for some time, and then he sat down to smoke and take his ease in the kitchen, the unused sitting-room being prepared for him to sleep in

afterwards; and I, returning to Miss Prince, was greeted by a host of questions. Were the villains caught?—or would they be in time? Could the policeman guess who they were, or whence they came? And did he think they would return again? Then she again declared that she could not, and would not remain longer in that horrid place.

“Nonsense,” I said, “We must stay out our time; and an adventure like this is not likely to occur again.”

“Well then, dear, you may stay alone, for I dare not, and will not,” was the angry reply. And so determined was she, that I finally yielded to her representations, and at once wrote two letters to go by the morning’s post—one to Mr. Maddox, and one to a lady of my acquaintance at Lanceville, a south-eastern watering-place, to which I had often thought of going. The tenor of my note to Mr. Maddox may easily be imagined; and I asked Mrs. Loxley whether she could take us in for a few days, whilst we looked out for

lodgings or a small house, in the event of our quitting our present abode in the course of a week or so.

By this time Mr. Orme had returned from Blakeham, and came in, bearing a—bottle of brandy in his hands! Don't be shocked, dear reader, for there was occasion, and I am but stating facts.

"There, Miss Brandreth!" he exclaimed, "I have brought some more medicine for you; but you must not take it all at once. Such a caution, however, would be best addressed to Miss Prince, whom I warn not to take an overdose."

And he turned towards her with a malicious smile. She understood his words literally, and began a fierce vindication of her character, which I interrupted to ask whether there were any news."

"Not yet," was the reply; "but I hope to have some by to-morrow."

Accordingly, seating himself by the fire, the doctor began to give me an account of his pro-

ceedings, whilst Miss Prince sat by with an injured air. Then I offered tea, but Mr. Orme declined partaking of any refreshment, and rose to go, saying,

“No; I will not stay this evening. You had much better take a little of that,” pointing to the brandy, “and then go to bed and rest. I do not know of any other prescription which would do you good; and indeed, you are as white as a sheet.”

So saying, he gave a few directions to the policeman in the kitchen, and took leave of us; and I obeyed his injunctions, but could not sleep. It may be supposed that I passed a restless, anxious night,—ill in body, ill at ease, grieving over my dog, and feeling miserable and forlorn, as if I did not know who to look to, or whither to go next.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. ORME'S EXERTIONS, AND THE REWARD
DEMANDED.

BEFORE we had finished breakfast the next morning, up drove Mr. Orme, in his gig, to say that a suspicious character had been taken in the neighbourhood, and that I was required to go before the magistrates at Blakeham to identify him. The hope of vengeance gave me strength, and flushed my face, and I would have gone with the doctor instantly,

had not Miss Prince vowed that she dared not be left alone.

“ But there is Betsy,” I replied.

Betsy was no one,—worse than no one, was the response, and my worthy ex-governess dared not remain with her alone. The policeman had left us, to prowl about the neighbourhood in search of our assailants, and she declared that she could not, and would not, remain at the ‘Retreat’ without me for an hour. How I protected her I could not tell, but it was useless to argue the point; moreover, she hinted in a loud whisper that it would be highly improper to go to Blakeham under the sole chaperonage of Mr. Orme; so that I finally resolved to send by him for a fly, and in the meantime make arrangements with Mrs. Redfern to come and take charge of Betsy whilst we were away.

Mr. Orme’s countenance, which had till then been all good-humour, thereupon changed, and he said, almost angrily,

“ Nonsense, Miss Brandreth; you had far

better come with me. This is merely waste of time."

"But you cannot take Miss Prince as well; and you hear she refuses to be left."

A little more argument, and off he went, looking very sulky, but I could not help it; and in about an hour and a half, up drove a fly, in which we went to Blakeham, having previously begged Mrs. Redfern and Betsy to pay due attention to all bolts and locks.

Mr. Orme received us on our arrival in the town, but with the same cold, sullen air; and escorted us to the police-court, where I felt excessively nervous, finding myself an object of such general attention; though I told my story without hesitation, and was gratified to find that it excited a deep murmur of compassion. The man in custody was, however, a stranger; and the two real culprits never were discovered. One of the magistrates, a quiet, elderly man, accompanied us afterwards to the hotel, and was very civil and attentive, much to the annoyance of Mr. Orme, who looked in

for a moment, with lowering brow ; and then, pleading an engagement near home, abruptly went away.

Presently, the magistrate also left us ; and Miss Prince and I, having rested and refreshed ourselves, went out to some shops (for of course, after our long sojourn in the country, there were many little matters which we wanted), and finally we set out on our homeward route.

This time they had provided us with an open fly,—I suppose because the wind had risen, and it was raining fast ; but as it was now dark, we did not wish to incur further delay, and so took our places without remonstrance.

How keenly the wind blew, as we proceeded ! After being shut up in the ‘ Retreat ’ so long, even an expedition to Blakeham seemed a toilsome journey ; and as the sleety rain blew full in our faces, we wrapped our shawls more closely round us, and wished we had provided warmer clothing.

The flyman seemed a little puzzled as he neared our miserable residence, and stopped more than once to ask for orders ; but at length I saw the clump of fir-trees looming through the darkness, and hushing Miss Prince's murmurs to the best of my ability, I began to explain to the man where to turn across the green.

Whiz ! went a poacher's gun, just in front of the horse's nose, and the flash and report made him start violently ; then the man seemed puzzled, and got down, whilst I felt much inclined to get out also ; not feeling at all comfortable during our progression in the dark. Miss Prince did her best to render matters more confused, and we were very nearly over-turned into a ditch ; but at length, more by luck than management, we contrived to reach the gate of the ' Retreat.' The flyman groped for the bell, and rung, but for some time no one came ; and I was alarmed to see that all was dark within,—no candles

lighted, no comfortable fire burning in the sitting-room as we had ordered.

A louder peal, and out came slip-shod Betsy, who seemed half asleep, and had to run back for the key. The gate opened, we entered, and found blinds flapping, and windows open, whilst not a vestige of a light could be discovered. I felt my way into the sitting-room, found matches, lighted a candle, paid and dismissed the flyman, and then turned fiercely round on Betsy, who replied stupidly that she did not know how it was; Mrs. Redfern had left her, and she had gone to sleep upon the kitchen rug; she did not think we should have been home so soon, or else she would have had things ready, and so the fire had gone out, and she had not had time to light it again before we rang.

Provoking; but I was too cold to stay and scold her. I left that to Miss Prince, whilst I procured wood and coal, and presently produced a cheerful fire, on which I placed the

kettle; and so we forgot our troubles in a cup of tea; but it was a chilling reception after our cold drive.

Mr. Orme appeared no more that evening; but in due time the policeman came (I did not forget to reward the village police for their exertions on this occasion), and protected by him we ventured to retire to rest early, and this fatigue caused me to sleep soundly.

Whilst dressing in the morning, I sadly missed poor Nero, who had been wont to enliven my toilette with his rough gambols and caresses; and I hoped,—oh, how I hoped!—that those who had destroyed him and my security at one fell blow, might speedily be taken, and punished as they deserved.

But there were thoughts of a different nature to occupy my mind, and I began to wonder how we should pay all that was owing, and make our escape from the ‘Retreat’ in the course of a week. Our expenses there had been far greater than I could have wished;—what with the high rent, carriers,

the paying for our letters, not to mention our journey to Blakeham of the day before, and the necessity of giving something to the rural police,—all small sums, doubtless; but, taken collectively, they were calculated to make a large hole in a limited income like my own.

My hundred and fifty pounds were supposed to cover all expenses, whilst Miss Prince kept her fifty pounds to herself, giving me her companionship gratis, it is true, instead of expecting a high salary, as formerly; but still, causing much additional expense. I did not choose to ask her for any help, though we were leaving the "Retreat" in such a hurry chiefly because she dared not stay there any longer; and I now began to turn the matter seriously over in my mind. Little did I think, in my prosperous Carlton days, that I should ever be set fast for want of twenty or thirty pounds, but such was now the case; and I saw no other means of relieving our difficulties than the sale of some trinkets, and even my watch and chain, if absolutely neces-

sary. I opened my dressing-case, and looked out certain rings, bracelets, and brooches, that had been presented to me in happier times; resolving once more to invoke the assistance of Mr. Orme. Luckily, I had no false pride; and therefore considered it less degrading to confess my troubles, and sell my private property to satisfy all claims, than to endeavour to put off the evil day, and thus leave the place in debt. Debt! ever increasing, ever weighing like lead upon one's heart and conscience, and ever more difficult to be shaken off. I liked to feel free, and then I cared little how I lodged, or where I went; nay, I should have been glad to earn an honest independence, had the idea ever been fully placed before me; but as yet I was so young and inexperienced that I scarce knew what was right and for the best. I only knew—thanks both to the precept and example of my uncle, Mr. Kennedy,—that there was nothing more disgraceful than to incur debts which I could not meet.

So, when Mr. Orme called in good time that morning, I had quite made up my mind, and had packed my jewels neatly in a little box; sternly refusing to bestow upon them even one last regretful sigh.

Mr. Orme had recovered his usual good-humour, and made many enquiries as to how I had fared since we last parted—and so forth; which enquiries being answered to his satisfaction, he next asked whether he could do anything for me at Blakeham.

“Yes,” I answered; “if it will not be troubling you too far, I should be very glad if you would execute a small commission.”

“Certainly. What is it?” was the answer; but Miss Prince was present, and prevented me from speaking openly. I accordingly invited Mr. Orme to come to the greenhouse first, and admire my skill in bringing on the flowers; and he, guessing my motives, readily assented; so in a short time I had told him what I wanted, and placed the packet in his hand.

"You will do the best you can for me?" I said.

He expressed much concern that such a step was necessary, but replied that he would indeed.

"Unless," he added, "you will borrow the sum you want from me. You see," laughing, "I have great confidence in your honour, Miss Brandreth. But, indeed, I should be glad to serve you in any way. How much would be required? Would ten pounds do?"

I was much touched by this unexpected offer of assistance, but of course was unwilling to accept it, unless as a last resource; and accordingly answered,

"Thank you; no. You are very kind to mention it, and you must not think me ungrateful; for that I am not; but to borrow from you would be only incurring one debt to pay off another; and circumstanced as I am, I cannot tell when it might be convenient to repay the money."

"Oh, never mind that," cried Mr. Orme;

"I am not a rich man, certainly, but I could afford to lend such a small sum as that without being in a hurry. You need not be afraid of my turning out a dun."

"Of that, I am certainly not afraid. You speak so warmly and disinterestedly;—with such a lamentable want of caution," was my laughing answer; to which my friend responded,

"So you really think so? Disinterested! Shall I tell you how you might repay me, if you chose?"

He fixed such a peculiarly earnest glance upon me whilst he was speaking, that I felt quite embarrassed, and was pulling the dead leaves from a geranium whilst searching for an answer, when Miss Prince joined us; curious to learn what we were doing.

"Florence, dear, you will take cold indeed. And I am not comfortable at being left alone."

Mr. Orme made an impatient gesture, and was about to give utterance to a speech to

match ; but, forcing back the latter, he contrived to say, in his usual manner,

“ Miss Brandreth tells me that you have arranged to leave the ‘ Retreat ’ very soon ;—that is, if Mr. Maddox will consent to let you go.”

“ Oh, he must, if we pay him his quarter’s rent ; and stay here now, we cannot ! ” was the answer, “ I would not live here longer, situated as we are, if he would pay me a hundred a year for so doing.”

“ I wish he would put you to the test, for I shall sorely miss my pleasant neighbours. What will become of me when there are no longer two lone ladies to drop in upon sometimes, and try to cheer ?—Do you remember our first interview, Miss Brandreth ? I almost thought you meant to turn me out ; and yet I did not come till summoned.”

“ Yes ; I sent for you,” exclaimed Miss Prince.

I reddened, and answered,

“True. You must have thought me very rude and disagreeable.”

“Disagreeable? No! I thought you charming from the first.”

Again I reddened ;—I felt it painfully ;—but this time from a different feeling,—a feeling that Mr. Orme, with the best intentions in the world, was apt to become too familiar when treated upon friendly terms. Yet how could I repel his attentions, and check his gallant speeches at a moment when he meant to be most kind? Uncertain what to say, I made no answer, and a dead silence followed his last remark. It was broken by his voice, as, with a momentary look of vexation, he drew out his watch, and said,

“Well, I must be off now; and” (mysteriously), “be sure, Miss Brandreth, I will do my very best. Have you any commission for me, Miss Prince? No? What a wonder! But so much the better. I thought ladies always wanted something. It seems,

however, that I was mistaken, and that it is only the young ones who are so exacting."

"Young ones!" echoed Miss Prince, indignantly. "What do you mean by that. There are no old ones here."

Mr. Orme caught my eye, and smiled as he replied,

"Oh, of course not. No one said there were. Ladies are never old, or plain, you know. Miss Brandreth, is it not a well-known fact?"

With these words, he went in quest of his horse, for he was riding to-day, whilst Miss Prince looked angrily after him; exclaiming,

"Well, I think his manners are too forward for good-breeding; and I never liked him less than now. Florence, dear, take care you do not give Mr. Orme undue encouragement, or talk to him too much. I think,—unless your intentions are serious, that you should avoid all tête-à-têtes."

It was now my turn to feel annoyed, and I

answered that I did not understand her meaning; upon which Miss Prince affected to apologise for being too plain-spoken, but the words "would slip out," and there was now no one else to advise me in such matters. It was very natural that I should wish to establish myself,—if I could get over former recollections,—and perhaps I had no chance of doing better now; so that, on the whole, I might after all know my own wishes best, and she was sorry that she had seemed to interfere. Her anxiety for me had induced her to say so much, but I must pardon her, for, indeed, she only desired to promote my happiness, and wished me well.

My cheek burned and my eyes flashed at her insolence,—for such I considered it; and, indeed, her looks were far less expressive of real interest than of spite; and I told her in my haughtiest manner that for the future I should be much obliged by her keeping her opinions to herself.

"I flatter myself that I am quite competent

to manage my own affairs," I said, in conclusion; "and perhaps you might be surprised if I told you why I wished to speak to Mr. Orme alone?"

Miss Prince appeared subdued by my vehemence, and muttered a humble apology, still spiced, however, by a touch of malice; and then, her curiosity getting the upper hand, she politely hinted that she should like to know what I had to say to the young doctor. So I told her, hoping that she would take her own short-comings with regard to helping to pay any portion of our joint expenses much to heart; and I was gratified, for she did look thoroughly uneasy; lamented that I should try to sell my trinkets, thought that was not the best plan, asked what Mr. Orme thought, wondered whether there was no one able and willing to lend "us" a little money,—mentioned Mr. Robertson; and finally, with much hesitation, offered herself to lend me five pounds for the present! It was very inconvenient, of course, but still

she would do anything to save me trouble; and she ended her professions with a loving kiss—an attention with which I could have dispensed.

However, there was nothing for it, but to accept her generous offer, and hope that Mr. Orme would bring me at least ten pounds from Blakeham; and with thoughts and arrangements of this nature, and with the duty of planting a few flowers on Nero's grave, my time was fully occupied till his return. He came back with a well-satisfied smile, which augured well, and making an excuse to lead me out into the garden—the excuse of visiting poor Nero's resting-place—he began eagerly to tell me all that he had done.

“Well, Miss Brandreth, I am sure you ought to be obliged to me, for I think I have managed wonderfully; and,” with a laugh, “I have done more for you than I would for any one else; for you must remember that I am tolerably well-known in these parts. I daresay Moore was surprised to see me in his

shop on such an errand, and fancied I had been helping to commit a burglary, or something of the kind."

"Oh, I am sorry you should have had to do anything disagreeable for me," I began ; but he ran on without allowing me to finish.

"However, I made the best bargain I could. I did not know till then that any one in Blakeham possessed so much ready money ; but, with great difficulty, I got Moore to give me twelve pounds for your trinkets. That was not so bad ?"

And Mr. Orme paused for me to commend him ; at the same time placing the money in my hand. Of course I thanked him warmly, for I felt really much obliged ; though I felt bound to repeat,

"But all the same, I feel half sorry that I troubled you ; that you were subjected to any annoyance on my account."

"Oh, nonsense ! Do not mention it. I was merely joking, of course ; for I am only too happy to do anything for you. Do you know,

though I felt sure that you would not stay out your time at the 'Retreat,' after your late alarm, I was quite taken aback when I learned that you intended going in a week. It seems so dreadfully soon—no time for anything; and I had half a mind to delay your departure by not executing your commission, for then I should have made sure of enjoying your society a little longer."

I laughed, rather uneasily, for again the doctor's manner was embarrassing; and would have been, under other circumstances, almost repellent to me—but now, how could I prove myself so ungrateful as to seem cold and proud?

"I appreciate your kindness all the more, now that I know what an effort it cost," was my reply. "And, for the rest, I shall be most thankful to escape. But for Miss Prince, however, who vows she dare not stay here any longer—I might not have been so cowardly as to run away. I own I am glad enough of the excuse, but unless she had said

so much, I do not suppose I should have written to Mr. Maddox."

"Well, I presume when you go it will be without the slightest shadow of regret."

"No; it is impossible to live long in any place—even a dungeon, I should imagine—without finding that there was something to cling to at the last; something animate, or inanimate, which had wound itself around one's heart. One might hate the place and its associations; and yet, when leaving, feel that there was something to regret."

"And what," asked the doctor, with much interest, "shall you regret in leaving the 'Retreat'?"

"The beech-woods; and the greenhouse, with its magnificent Arum lilies and camelias, and the other flowers on which I have bestowed such thought and pains. I have toiled hard to bring them to perfection; and now, just when they are beginning to repay me for my trouble, I must go away and leave them all."

Mr. Orme's countenance fell, and he asked, very urgently,

"And is that all?" I hesitated, and he continued; "Only the trees and flowers! Then you leave all deeper regrets to me?" Still I was silent. "You can grieve for your unlucky dog," he added; "but—but, Miss Brandreth, shall you not cast one thought upon—any human being whom you leave?"

Feeling bound to say something, "I shall miss your kind attentions," I replied.

"Miss them! How much, I wonder? Well, I have done my best to help you, and might hope, perhaps, for some return. When you spoke this morning of my disinterestedness, I meant to have told you how you might pay me, if you chose—I was prevented; but—shall I tell you now?"

Growing more and more uneasy, I began to have a foreboding of what would follow, and would have given anything to make my escape. But since that was not possible, I could only stand still and listen, trembling

for the end of this unwelcome scene. Mr. Orme went on, with ever increasing excitement.

“ Miss Brandreth, it is useless to pretend to be blind, for you must have understood the truth. Tell me that you do not mean to leave this neighbourhood for ever ;—that I may hope. I have not much to offer, it is true, but I will do my best to take care of you, and make you a good husband. You are poor and friendless, and I can give you a safe home. Of my feelings it is useless to say much, for you can guess—what attraction always drew me to the ‘Retreat.’ ”

Though Mr. Orme’s manner had led me to expect this climax, each word seemed to fall upon me like a sudden blow ; and I almost writhed, whilst my face was in a flame. What could I say ? Oh, how could I help wounding his feelings ;—giving the most desperate offence ? It was necessary to speak, and I stammered out something—what, I cannot now remember, about this being totally

unlooked for, about my being unprepared, and that I trusted he would not think the worse of me, if I ventured to decline the offered honour. Once I should have spoken haughtily enough; but now I had grown more humble—and though, when I thought of Percival Staunton, I could not help feeling secretly disgusted by the attentions of one so far beneath him in birth, intellect, position,—everything,—I still felt sensible of Mr. Orme's late kindness, and felt, too, that he deserved a gentle answer. He saw no 'great gulf' between us, and why should I? Apparently, we were now placed upon an equal footing; or, if any one had an advantage over the other, it was he. I was an unprotected female—a mere nobody; and, doubtless, many of my acquaintances, including Miss Prince, would have thought that the chance of becoming Mrs. Orme was one which I was worse than foolish to despise.

I thought very differently, however; and felt as if the humiliations attendant upon my

uncertain position increased ever more and more. It was not that Mr. Orme was poor, or insignificant in station, or that I was ambitious, and had any wild hopes left; but that he belonged to an entirely different class—inasmuch that his manners, tastes, and ideas, were at constant variance with my own. What he proposed was impossible to me, and gently as I tried to speak, he saw this instantly, and took offence. His face flushed, and he answered in the angry tones, prompted by wounded *amour propre* :

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Brandreth, for presuming. Can you overlook the liberty? But no; I may answer that question for myself;—you despise me; you look down upon me, and therefore my offence is not to be forgiven. Had your manner been different, I might have been upon my guard; but—this was your own doing; and you do not think that I should have taken so much interest in you had I not hoped for some return.”

He spoke vehemently,—incoherently, whilst

I stood trembling with excitement; but his manner was not calculated to make me relent. I felt that I might have been foolish, though how I could scarcely tell. I felt sorry for him, and I suppose I ought to have felt a little flattered by his preference; but I could not;—gratitude, and all other pleasureable feelings being swallowed up in a kind of terror—a nightmare sensation, such as I might have experienced had Percival himself been a witness of this scene. But, at length, my powers of endurance gave way, and covering my face with my hands, I burst into a violent fit of tears—an exhibition which I felt heartily ashamed of at the time; but, as it turned out, was the best thing that could have happened for us both. Mr. Orme was instantly softened, and spoke more kindly, whilst I sobbed out,

“Despise you! Look down upon you! No, it is not that. If you could but see my heart, you would know better. Things have happened which will leave a life-long im-

pression, and prevent my ever thinking—" But here I broke off, and said, passionately, "Oh, if you but knew what I had suffered, you would spare me further pain."

Poor Mr. Orme looked quite humbled and confused, and only ejaculated, in a half whisper,

"A prior attachment, which can never be forgotten?"

I assented.

"But—" he began, only to be interrupted by my saying,

"If you wish me well, you will say no more about this,—never mention it again. I trust to your honour never to allude to it in any way. The secret was forced from me, and I trust not quite in vain. Let me feel that I have not lost a friend."

I looked up entreatingly as I spoke, and saw, by his countenance, that an inward struggle was taking place—between selfish passion and wounded *amour propre*, on the one hand, and manliness and generosity, upon

the other. The strife did not last long; and, to his honour be it said, the nobler feelings gained the victory. He took my proffered hand, and wrung it hard.

“Miss Brandreth, it is difficult to give up all hope; but I wish, as I have always done, that I could serve you in any way. If, in the heat of the moment, I said anything calculated to give offence, you will think no more about it, I am sure. And—you must promise that you will not quite forget me after you are gone.”

Thus, our peace was sealed, and I secured a friend. All honour to the man of any class, who can thus overcome the resentful feelings which too often spring from disappointed hopes, and bid kindness crush out pique. I have described Mr. Orme, from the first, as he appeared to me; but I must now add, that whatever the faults and failings of our nature, deficiencies of education, or drawbacks of position, I firmly believe that there is a well of pure feeling in most human

hearts, the waters of which, when released, exert a holy, healing influence. Woe to him or her who drives them back again, whether they exist in his own or in his neighbour's breast, for what after-influence can fertilise the burnt-up soil !

To descend once more to common language, I rejoiced then, and still rejoice, that I gained a friend, instead of creating an ill-wisher, as I might have done in prouder and more prosperous days. We gain, or ought to gain, experience every year ; and I now think far more highly of Mr. Orme than I do of Mr. Robertson, though the latter would never have dreamed of meeting the village doctor upon equal terms, and would even have thought it a great condescension to consult him about any trifling ailment. But I speak of people as I find them, and it seems to me that kind, gentlemanly feelings make the gentleman ; therefore, I give the highest praise to Mr. Orme, who had done all he undertook to do, and never failed us at our

need;—nay, who now felt for and would still have helped me; though, as he said, in the heat of the moment, his feelings and kind actions were never destined to meet with the return he wished. His manner might sometimes annoy me; but the warm heart made amends for much, and I hope that I may never prove ungrateful. What more I said to him is of no great consequence. I satisfied him that I looked upon him as a friend, and wished him well; and then he took leave of me, and I returned thoughtfully into the house.

CHAPTER X.

FAREWELL TO THE 'RETREAT,' AND ARRIVAL
AT MRS. LOXLEY'S.

MORE and more anxious was I becoming to escape from the 'Retreat' and Mr. Orme, for it would be painful and embarrassing to meet the latter now. I suppose the general opinion would have been, that I should have shown more wisdom, by trying to get 'settled' upon any terms; but my opinion was, and is still, that rather than marry, except from the

highest motives, it would be better to drag on the most forlorn existence—alone.

Mr. Orme called again, in a day or two, to see if he could do anything to help us; but he stayed only a very short time; and the few words we interchanged appeared constrained, as if we were bent on making conversation.

Mrs. Loxley, who was a widow, with a large jointure, wrote, in an amiably patronising manner, to say that she should be happy to see us for a week or two, and named the day on which we were to go to Lanceville. She assured us, moreover, that, since we wanted to look out for a residence, the whole mornings would be at our disposal, and that she hoped we should meet with something satisfactory.

Mr. Maddox gave us permission to leave at the time we wished, upon condition that we paid something over the quarter's rent, to make amends for so short a notice; and, to save trouble, I agreed to this. So far, so

good. I began to pack up; and arranged that Betsy was to go with us as far as London, whence (as we did not value her services) she could be dismissed in safety to the place from whence she came; and, in due time, the day arrived. A person sent by Mr. Maddox received the rent, looked over the inventory, and duly charged for damages;—the damages consisting chiefly of broken cups and glasses, thrown down by Betsy or poor Nero;—and then we got into our fly, bidding adieu to the deep woods and brightening greenhouse,—to the lonely cottage and the savage neighbourhood,—and the grave of my poor dog. It may sound morbid; but I felt that most of all, and stood by that mound, in the garden, for a quarter of an hour or more, upon the morning of our departure; one thought leading to another, until I was lost in a maze of painful retrospection.

Once off, however, my thoughts returned to the future; and, despite Miss Prince's

chatter, I found enough serious matter to occupy my mind until we arrived at the Blakeham station, where we were assisted to alight by Mr. Orme, who stood there watching for us, and looking most disconsolate. I pitied him, but could do no more; and, fortunately, the hurry and excitement of taking tickets, seeing after our boxes, and so forth, obviated the necessity of saying much. Yet he bade me take care of my health, and said that I was looking very ill; and he asked me again to think of him occasionally. Then he wrung my hand hard, after placing me in the railway carriage—lingered wistfully upon the step till the train started, and gazed after us (or rather me) till we were out of sight. 'This I learned from Miss Prince, who looked out from curiosity, and saw him standing on the platform; upon which she waved her handkerchief in token of farewell—an attention with which I have no doubt he was extremely gratified.

I was far from well, for the exertions of the

last few months, followed by the excitement of the first week or two of our sojourn at the 'Retreat,' had told upon my weakened frame, and I could ill bear the fatigues of the journey. We left the cottage between eleven and twelve, arrived in town about two hours and a half afterwards, and crossed over to the other station, whence we were to proceed to Lanceville, having previously started Betsy on her homeward route. Then came a long wait, and then on again; then a short drive from the station to Mrs. Loxley's—Victoria Crescent,—where we arrived about seven, having left the bulk of our luggage to remain till sent for at the Blakeham station; and then we descended, heartily tired; at least, Miss Prince said she was, and I can answer for myself.

Victoria Crescent, handsome in reality, looked doubly large and handsome after the "Retreat," with its low-ceiled rooms and narrow passage; and I drew a deep breath as I stood beneath the portico of number five.


A portly butler admitted us, and a few paces behind stood the lady of the house, all empressement, to receive her guests; her welcome being so much warmer than I had expected, that it really quite revived me for the moment.

She was a tall, stout, showy old lady; but her dress was subdued by the fact of her being in half mourning at that time; and so was her manner, for Lanceville was empty,—it being the dead season of the year there,—and she accordingly felt rather dull; so that she hailed the arrival of anyone with much delight. She embraced me, shook hands rather condescendingly with Miss Prince, and then ushered us upstairs to our rooms; bidding us make haste, for tea was waiting.

“I thought you would prefer tea after your journey, so I dined early,” she observed. “But I have ordered each of you a mutton-chop.”

We thanked her, made all due haste with

our *toilette*, and then went down, to find her seated in the dining-room behind a steaming urn. The room was large and well-proportioned, and looked out into a little garden; and our rooms above were pleasant, but had not much view—roof after roof, villa after villa, terrace after terrace, meeting the eye in all directions, and shutting out all but a very narrow strip of distant sea; insomuch that, spacious as the house was, I felt disappointed. I was conscious of sad deficiencies on the score of dress; not having been able to get anything new, or secure the services of a dress-maker at the “Retreat;” nay, by living some months in such a savage place, I had lost all knowledge of the fashions of the day, and felt convinced that I looked very queer and shabby in my well-worn black attire; especially when I saw Mrs. Loxley, who considered herself a great authority in such matters, scrutinising me earnestly from head to foot. Her eyes dwelt longest on my sleeves,—the old-fashioned cut of that part



of a lady's garments telling tales sooner than any other,—and then she complacently looked down upon, and smoothed her own, which were quite according to the prevailing mode.

Mrs. Loxley had been an acquaintance,—not an intimate friend,—of my family for some years past; and had been always considered an overbearing, patronising, but good-natured sort of woman, with a dash of vulgarity (as I think all overbearing, patronising people have) in her composition. In by gone days she had often pressed me to visit her at Lanceville, but I had never had an opportunity, or indeed, felt particularly desirous of doing so; and now I do not think I should have troubled her, if I had had any alternative. However, she received us in a more friendly manner than I had expected; and even now did not begin an attack upon my dress at once,—which was a proof of wonderful amiability and forbearance on her part. She merely looked me well over; and as we seated ourselves at the tea-table, observed,

"Have you not been well lately? You look thin in the face, and your nose is pinched. It looks bad to see anyone with such a drawn expression."

I replied that I had been much out of health for some time past, and that recent alarms and excitement had not done me any good.

"Oh, of course not," was the answer. "But, my dear, how came you to fix upon that horrible 'Retreat?' From your account, it must have been a dreadful place."

"A dreadful place, indeed!" exclaimed Miss Prince. "One was never safe there for a moment."

Mrs. Loxley stared, but made no reply; and again addressed herself to me; upon which poor Miss Prince grew very red and nervous.

"Eh, how was it? How came you to go to such a place?"

"It was a stupid trick, certainly," I said, "but at the time I scarce knew where to go,

or what to do ; and then an old friend of our family promised to look out—”

“An old friend?” interrupted Mrs. Loxley. “What old friend? Pray who could lead you such a wild-goose chase as that?”

Before I could answer, Miss Prince had uttered the name of Mr. Robertson, or perhaps I might have evaded the question ; but it was too late now.

“Mr. Robertson ! Oh ! And how did you get hold of him, I wonder?”

“I am sure I scarcely know ; but since he knew my family and all our affairs so well, I had every reason to expect that he would do his best.”

“And not play you such a trick as that ! Well, I wonder at your following *his* advice.”

“Why?”

“Why? My dear Florence, you must know that man’s character by this time as well as I do ; and that he is not quite the right sort of counsellor for a young lady like

yourself. I'll tell you what I have heard about him lately."

And accordingly, Mrs. Loxley, who appeared to keep a number of detectives, in the form of acquaintances, in every county, so as to have a good idea (allowing for occasional distortions of facts) of what everyone whom she had ever known was doing, in all parts of England, at once burst forth into a string of scandalous anecdotes, which made my face burn; whilst she kept looking at me sharply, to see if I was cheating her by feigning ignorance.

"Eh! Did you never hear that till now?" she kept enquiring. "It is a fact, I assure you, for I heard it from the best authority. He is a regular scapegrace, and you ought never to have had anything to do with him. In Lanceville, it would be considered anything but *comme il faut*."

"Well, it is past now," I answered, rather peevishly, for my head ached badly, and I was growing tired of this discussion. "It

was his doing that we went to the 'Retreat,' but as we were the only sufferers, it does not matter to anybody else."

"No, perhaps not; but it was not the thing. Such a place! And such a man to send you there! Did he ever visit you at this 'Retreat?'"

"Never; I think he went abroad immediately."

"Ah, yes; so he did; and you know the reason?" cried Mrs. Loxley, flying off on a new scent.

"You have just hinted at it," was my answer; and then I wearily rested my head upon my hand.

Mrs. Loxley eyed me fixedly for a moment and then enquired,

"What is the matter? Does your head ache? You are not feeling ill, I hope?"

"I am only tired with my long journey."

"Oh, I am sorry. Have some more tea, and another mutton chop," the last refreshment being proffered in a fainter tone, for

Mrs. Loxley, though bent on hospitality just now, was very economical withal; nine hundred a year scarcely sufficing (according to herself) for her own immediate wants. However, I declined, and she was better satisfied. "You are very fragile, I think," she added; and then turning to Miss Prince, "Come," she said, "let me give you another cup of tea. There is plenty left. And you may as well eat that piece of bread-and-butter for no one else seems to want it, and it's a pity to leave it for the servants."

Miss Prince laughed nervously and rubbed her hands, as if she did not quite like her hostess's tone; but having accustomed herself to cringe to those whose circumstances were superior to her own, she pocketed the affront, and ate the bread and butter. I felt annoyed for her, and already wished that I had not begged the shelter of Mrs. Loxley's roof; as, the first impulse of politeness over, she seemed likely to prove more overbearing than in

former days. The last-named lady continued, still addressing Miss Prince,

“Well, what did you get to eat there? I don’t suppose you lived over well in that outlandish place.”

“No, indeed, ma’am; we were often badly off enough;—reduced to live on eggs, and such light food.”

“Eggs? Oh, you could get eggs?—and very good things too. I don’t pity you, if that was the case. What did you pay for eggs out there? They ought to have been tolerably cheap.”

“Eh,” said Miss Prince, “what were they, Florence, dear?”

“What! Don’t you know? It is time you learned something of such matters,” cried our hostess, in her loudest tones.

Miss Prince looked confused, but I replied,

“No; I was the housekeeper; and they were a shilling a score after Christmas.”

"Oh, that's cheap enough. If I had known before hand, I think I should have commissioned you to bring me a basket full with you when you came; but it's too late now. What do you think eggs cost me here?"

"Two-pence a piece, perhaps."

"They did a short time ago, but now they have grown more plentiful I pay three-half-pence each; and one can't eat them with comfort at such a price as that. You are not thinking of settling at Lanceville? It would never do for you under present circumstances. It may suit me very well in some respects, but I can do as I like, whilst with you the case is different, and you must cut your coat according to your cloth. House-rent is dear, and meat and poultry are dear, and so are fish and vegetables,—everything in fact. One pays for the very air one breathes, and I should advise you to go and see what you can do at Fairwater, for I should think there you might live far more cheaply. It is about ten miles off—a small, quiet place, where you might

get on famously. You can't possibly get on here, for no one will take any notice of you if you cannot entertain. It is no use expecting to be asked out into society, for people will not do it unless you can ask them back again ; and in your position that is of course quite out of the question. But at Fairwater they will lend you books, and ask you to tea occasionally, and you will put on your calash and go, and all that sort of thing. I should not like it, for I want something more lively ; but that is quite a different matter."

"Whether I stay here or go to Fairwater," I answered, "I do not want people to patronise, or ask me out. But all the same, if it really is as you say, I think the inhabitants of Lanceville must be a very inhospitable set."

Mrs. Loxley fired up at this, and answered rather fiercely,

"Not at all. In a place of this kind one is accustomed to give visit for visit, and party for party ; and quite right, too. How else would society go on ?"

"I have never thought of that; but our country fashions are more hospitable, for there we invite people for the sake of their company, and not merely in hope of a return."

So I spoke, somewhat warmly, for I felt not a little disgusted with Mrs. Loxley's selfish theories, and the complacent manner in which she propounded them. Miss Prince glanced at me in a warning way, and our good hostess looked exceedingly indignant.

"Ah, it is all very well!" replied the latter. "You can do what you like in the country, but it would not answer here. One cannot entertain every one for nothing; and so, if any of my neighbours omit to ask me back again, I never dream of inviting them a second time."

And she nodded her head-dress, in which waved two little black feathers, defiantly at me. I accepted the challenge, and was beginning,

"Then you do not—"

When Miss Prince, who was working herself gradually into a fever of apprehension, hastened to turn the conversation into a safer channel by praising that very head-dress with the dictatorial plumes. Wise woman; for the manœuvre succeeded, and Mrs. Loxley gradually smoothed her ruffled brow, began to tell the history of the cap, its price, where it came from, and the circumstances under which it was bought; and then, turning to me, she said triumphantly,

“The sleeves of that dress are quite out of date. Did you not know it? Everyone is wearing wide sleeves now; so why don't you have yours altered according to the present fashion?”

I laughed, and answered,

“Oh, they do well enough for me. This is an old dress—”

“So I see.”

“And I have not had time lately to think about such matters.”

"But it is not so much trouble to have things made as they are worn, and it makes every difference in one's appearance."

"You would have found many difficulties in the way of getting things modernised, if you had been living at the 'Retreat.'"

"Ah, true, I had forgotten ; and I suppose you did not require much dress there. Anything would do for your tumble-down old cottage? Hey?"

"Oh, anything ; but now that we have returned to civilisation, we intend to reform our dress in various ways ;—get new bonnets, and all that sort of thing."

"I should think it would be very necessary, for there is not much shape left in that which you wore to-day. I would not be seen in such a dowdy head-piece. But what kind of bonnets do you intend to buy? I never get mine at Lanceville, or everyone would copy me, and I hate to be dressed in a livery with all the town ; but the shops here are good enough for you. What kind is it to be?"

"Oh, I scarcely know at present. I must look about me first; but I think a neat straw, or something of the kind."

"Well," returned Mrs. Loxley, rather scornfully, "I should think you may easily get that."

"And I think something made up;—something light and pretty," said Miss Prince.

"Oh, well, I daresay you will have no difficulty in suiting yourselves. The shops here are certainly superior to your country ones."

"Oh, certainly," returned the flattering echo.

I said nothing, but smiled to myself; so to revenge herself upon me, Mrs. Loxley seized my sleeve, and asked,

"What is this material? It seems rather poor and thin; and it is a great mistake to buy cheap things, for they never look well, and cost more than good ones in the end."

"This dress has been a good one in its time," I answered, laughing; "and was by

no means cheap ; but it has seen much service, which may account for it being rather thin."

Mrs. Loxley looked exceedingly disgusted, and enquired,

"Will it wash?"

And then, without waiting for an answer, she began to finger her own thick silk, and say,

"Now this has been a good one, if you like. Take hold of it. Yes, feel at it, Miss Prince. There is some consistency and wear in this. Don't you think it is a good one?"

"A beautiful silk. A very rich one, indeed," exclaimed Miss Prince.

"Well, I bought it at Marshall and Snelgrove's, and it cost me fifteen guineas—just for ordinary wear. It is false economy to buy a poor silk, for they look so shabby, and there is no wear in them. They fray at once. So don't you go running after bargains."

"I have no intention of doing so. I mean to buy good and useful dresses of their kind, and quite agree with you, Mrs. Loxley, that

when people can afford it, it is false economy to buy poor things. But, unfortunately, all people are not so well off as you are—myself, for instance. So, as you remarked just now, I must cut my coat according to my cloth.”

Mrs. Loxley tossed her head, and answered, “Hum! Miss Prince, will you ring the bell?”

Miss Prince obeyed, and enter the old butler to remove the tea-tray, which he did with shaky hands; his red face and portly figure testifying to much good living, and perhaps to something more.

“Here, take away,” cried Mrs. Loxley, “and, Thompson, tell Rose I want her.”

“Yes, ma’am,” returned Thompson, in a fawning tone, and exit with the tray.

“I was telling you about my bonnet,” continued Mrs. Loxley, “or, at all events, I meant to do. She shall bring it down, and I think you will agree with me that it is not quite such a one as everybody wears.”

Enter Rose, who, after receiving various

directions, disappears, and presently makes her entrance again with three or four bonnets of divers shapes and colours — black and scarlet, yellow, lilac, and grey, with enormous sprays of black and white flowers—the last-named being supposed to represent half-mourning. Rose is a delicate-looking young woman, and seems afraid of her dictatorial mistress, standing timidly in the back-ground while the bonnets are displayed, and answering most deferentially when spoken to. Miss Prince starts up, and admires everything most enthusiastically. I look on in silence till appealed to, and then express my opinion with some reserve, for, in truth, I am already growing weary of my hostess.

“Will she never allow me a moment’s rest?” I asked myself, almost in despair; for my head ached terribly, and I would have given much to lie down and be quiet for an hour or two. But quiet was out of the question here. Mrs. Loxley, when not entertaining, usually sat in the dining-room all day,

though she had a handsome drawing-room above, and a good, airy sitting-room below ; and as there was no sofa, and she occupied the only easy chair, I had to sit upon a stiff one till I felt tired out. And, meantime, her tongue ran on incessantly, until I became giddy from the very sound.

Rose being dismissed, and the great bonnet question worn threadbare, Mrs. Loxley exclaimed, *apropos* to nothing, as it seemed,

"She appears consumptive. I don't half like her looks. Do you ?

"Whose ?" I inquired ; and then, by a sudden effort of mind, "Oh, Rose's. No, she does not look particularly strong."

"Strong ! She's a mere reed ; not suited in any way to the situation. There she goes—crawl—crawl, so slowly up and down the stairs, and panting, till she cannot speak, when she arrives at the top. Now, I want a person of some energy ; not a poor spiritless thing like that. She has faintings, too, they tell me, and I don't half like it ; so I shall

get rid of her as soon as possible. No sickly creatures have any business here, for I cannot bear them about me."

"Poor thing!" was all I said; but I inwardly pitied the unfortunate girl, who, out of health and spirits, was compelled by circumstances to go out to service, and was thus consigned to the tender mercies of Mrs. Loxley, who exacted much work, and had no compassion to bestow. Rose was worried and frightened, and made to run up and down, until she grew worse and worse; she met with no sympathy or attention, and when unfit for further exertion, would be packed off to shift for herself as she could. Such is the way of the world—for I fear such selfish characters as Mrs. Loxley's are not uncommon. Would that it were otherwise; for then the interests of a household would be more united, and the bond of union between employers and employed more firm. As it is, convenience is the only rule observed on either side; and the mistress too often oppresses or neglects,

whilst the servant deceives, and indemnifies herself, upon the sly, for the constraint she labours under in her lady's presence—thus at the same time flattering and cheating. But it might be very different !

To return, however, to Mrs. Loxley.

“Poor thing! Why poor thing?” she asked. “She has every indulgence here ; plenty to eat and drink, and—” Here she paused, and then exclaimed again, “I do not like her looks. I'll speak to Thompson on the subject.”

And accordingly, she rang the bell. Thompson obeyed the summons.

“Trim the lamp,” said Mrs. Loxley.
“What's the matter with it?”

“Nothing, ma'am,” was the reply.

“But there is, for it burns dim; Miss Brandreth observed it, too.” (This was the first mention of the subject.) Then, while the man was attending to it, she continued,

“How does Rose appear this evening?”

“Much as usual, ma'am.”

"No better?"

"No, I can't say that she does."

"Why, how does she seem?"

"So weakly like, ma'am, and so faint at times; and then she gets quite hysterical."

"What does she think about herself? Does she seem at all out of spirits?"

"Yes, ma'am; she often seems low, and then it's of no use trying to cheer her, for she does not seem as if she could keep up."

"Ah, poor thing, poor thing. It's consumption, I believe. She looks it, and I don't think she will last much longer. Has she any cough?"

"Yes, ma'am, a sort of hacking cough; and she appears as if it gave her pain."

"Ah!" And Mrs. Loxley shook her head. "She is not at all fit for such a place as this."

"No, ma'am; I should say she wanted rest."

"But how can she have it here? I want my maid to wait on me, and not to sit still and complain."

"Certainly," said Thompson, shifting round, "If Rose could only exert herself more, it might be all the better for her in the end. I often say to her, 'Now, can't you seem a bit more lively, when you go to wait on missis?'"

"Well, and then?"

"She only shakes her head, and says she cannot."

"Ah, it is most unfortunate. I think the lamp will do now, Thompson. If you screw it round, you only make it worse."

"Very well, ma'am. It burns better now, I think."

Thus, with a final screw round of the lamp, which well nigh plunged us into utter darkness, the obsequious butler retired down stairs again.

"I shall not keep her any longer. I shall look out for another in her place at once," cried Mrs. Loxley, as he shut the door. "Suppose she were to die in my house."

"That would, indeed, be most inconvenient," exclaimed Miss Prince.

"You may well say so; and even if it did not come to that, it is most depressing to my spirits. I like cheerful people. And how is she fit to travel with me when I go away?"

"Yes, how indeed?" rejoined the echo.

And in discussions like these the evening, which to me appeared interminable, wore away. Ten o'clock arrived at length, however, and then Mrs. Loxley rang again, exclaiming, "Prayers."

I felt much relieved; but as the servants were some little time in obeying the summons, Mrs. Loxley employed the interval in continuing an account of some young ladies at Lanceville, whose complexions "were certainly not natural." She interrupted herself to ejaculate,

"Dear me, what can they be doing?" and then, opening a large book of family prayers, knelt down before it—in which devotional attitude she still continued her recital. "Well, I'll tell you how I found out that it was paint. It was at the Bachelor's Ball;—(I don't go out

much now,—that is, not to balls, for what should I do there? but on this occasion I could not very well refuse. It would have been a marked thing, and given much offence, and it was very well done;—fine supper, and all that sort of thing). Well, I was telling you, about the middle of the evening I saw Miss Piercy, who looked overblooming—”

But, at this point the butler threw the door wide open, and Rose, the maid, followed by the cook and housemaid, entered and knelt down. Miss Prince and I did likewise, and then Mrs. Loxley rattled through the evening prayers (it may seem an odd expression, but I cannot find any other half so suitable); we rose again; she stared hard at poor pale Rose, who did not look as if she painted; the door closed; and Mrs. Loxley resumed her narrative, at the very point where she had broken off.

“Well, Miss Piercy,—Flora Piercy—fainted, all at once, and still the red bloom remained upon her cheeks. It was tight-lacing that

did it, I believe, for she was fond of her figure, and screwed in a little waist about the size of my wrist; so the consequences were—a scene. Down she went, and there was a general rush of gentlemen; and you should have seen their looks, and heard their comments. As for me, I called for water, and dipping my handkerchief in it,—no, her handkerchief, for I did not want to spoil my own,—I bathed her face, and that told tales. The handkerchief grew red; the face became as pale as death. There was such a to-do with her mother and the whole set-out of them; and if it had been my daughter I would have taken good care that she did not go into society any more that winter; but her mother thought otherwise; and so, there Miss Flora was at Lady Hawkshaw's, as bold as brass the very evening afterwards.—What do you think of that? It's true enough. And I thought it scandalous that any girl should act thus,—and that any mother could hold her head

up after such a sad *exposé*. But they did not care."

"Curious woman," I said to myself; "why consider it necessary to have prayers at all, if you must hurry though them to continue such a piece of scandal? Much you must have profited by your devotions!"

In short, the whole performance appeared a regular farce. But my history of the evening is becoming too long already, so I must hasten to a close. Mrs. Loxley dismissed us without offering us any further refreshments,—even a glass of wine,—and I did not feel sufficiently at home to ask for anything, so I bade my hostess 'good-night,' and mounted to my own room, where a pleasant-looking, smart housemaid followed, and offered her assistance. I soon dismissed her, for I was so over-tired that my only wish was to be quite alone, and by-and-bye I grew so faint that I was obliged to have recourse to some Eau de Cologne and water, to enable me to undress;

and even after taking that restorative I sat for some time gasping in a chair; for I was no longer strong, active, hopeful, as of old, but a poor, weak, shaken wretch, whose bodily and mental powers of endurance were tried at every turn. Past events, my journey, want of rest on my arrival, and the continuous sound of Mrs. Loxley's voice for three hours, had altogether been too much for me; and I rested ill enough that night; though the large, airy chamber provided for me contrasted most favourably with that which I had occupied at the "Retreat."

CHAPTER XI.

AN OVERBEARING HOSTESS.

Mrs. LOXLEY had said that breakfast would be ready at nine o'clock, so, unwell as I still felt in the morning, I endeavoured to be down in time. I heard a clock in one of the rooms strike as I was hastening down stairs ; and meeting the housemaid at the same moment, I enquired whether Mrs. Loxley was yet visible.

"Yes, miss," she answered. "We have had prayers, and breakfast is quite ready."

I felt puzzled, and drew out my watch.

"Surely I cannot be mistaken? No; it is just nine o'clock."

"Yes, miss; but that's nothing to go by. I suppose missis told you nine; but the fact is, she gets down at any time,—just as she happens to be in the humour. Sometimes she is down by half-past eight; and now and then she rings us in at eight. But never mind her ways. She is fidgety, to be sure; but she is a kind-hearted creature, on the whole. We are used to her, and don't take any notice."

I could not help smiling at this confidential communication; but merely saying,

"Oh, it is not my fault, then," I turned back to warn Miss Prince, who was just emerging from her room, and descended with me in a flutter of consternation.

We found Mrs. Loxley at her post behind the steaming urn, a newspaper spread out on one side, and a heap of notes, bills, &c., upon the other. Our tea was already poured out

and set in our places to grow cold, and our plates furnished with cold ham, from a small fragment on the sideboard.

“Come, come,” exclaimed our hostess, extending two fingers to me, “you ought not to keep me waiting. What have you been about? Oh, you have a headache, Florence. Is it better? You look very sickly. But has Miss Prince a headache, too?”

I explained that she herself had led us to imagine that nine o'clock was time enough ; and Miss Prince rubbed her hands, and nervously apologised for being late ; whilst Mrs. Loxley employed herself in breaking toast into her tea.

“Before you sit down, Miss Prince, just ring the bell,” she said ; and her command being obeyed, the portly butler forthwith appeared.

“Thompson, bring me an egg. I don't ask you to have one, Florence, because eggs are bad for a headache. A little cold ham will do you far more good.”

She fished up her toast with a tea-spoon, and presently resumed,

“Eggs are very scarce and dear. They have cost me two-pence a-piece all along.”

“Oh.” I thought, “so that is why you do not offer me one; and not because I have a headache. And it seems they have risen in price to-day.”

By-and bye Mrs. Loxley offered us some butter,—rather faintly,—and at the same time remarking upon the cost, so that we knew it was intended to be respected. I felt half amused, and half disgusted; and Miss Prince, who thoroughly appreciated good living, was divided between awe and inclination; so in the end she made but a poor breakfast. Mrs. Loxley ate hers hurriedly; and then rising, threw herself into her easy chair to read the paper; interrupting herself to talk to Thompson when he entered, and sending various messages to the cook.

Every action was hurried and abrupt. She ate as if in haste, talked very fast, and

turned and rustled the "Times," with such rapidity, that I am sure she derived no information from its columns. Then throwing it upon the floor, she sat with one foot upon it, whilst she recommenced a series of interrogatories and observations, similar to those of the evening before, as if determined that no one else should have a chance of looking at it. And thus a long hour passed away.

Then to my relief, she rose, and said,

"Well; don't you mean to go out to-day? It is fine now, and may rain this afternoon."

"Oh, yes," I answered, also rising, in the eager, but vain hope of making my escape; for Mrs. Loxley added instantly,

"Make haste, then. I have got some things to do, and we may as well go together. Come, Miss Prince."

So we sallied forth; and Mrs Loxley went to the fishmonger's, the green-grocer's, and another shop or two; taking us through all the back streets, after which she announced

that she was tired, but that we might stay out till one o'clock, her luncheon time.

When freed from the restraint of her presence, I wished to go to the Parade, and inhale the sea-air for an hour; for hitherto I had scarcely caught a glimpse of the sea, and felt disappointed in Lanceville, which, spite of its general popularity, appeared to me an ugly, glaring, bustling place. But Miss Prince wanted to shop; and though she sat down upon a bench for a few minutes, she was fidgeting all the time, so that I soon had to accompany her back into the streets. There was not much to regret, however, for the beach looked dreary and dirty, the Parade was deserted, and the long white rows of houses tired my eyes, causing me to think regretfully of the picturesque Yorkshire watering places, where I had sojourned in olden times. There, I could have lingered for the day together on the smooth, broad sands, watching the lazy tide come lapping up to

the foot of dark grey rocks, beneath whose shadow I reclined at ease—in any costume I chose to wear.

Bridlington Quay, with its quiet sands, and breezy cliffs, where the slender oats rustled, and the more majestic wheat and barley waved;—or Scarboro', called by many the queen of English watering places, with her castled height, and wide extending bay. Oh, the pleasure of making one's way over rough rocks, and round points and headlands, to see what came next; of finding one's-self enshrouded in thick mists, or caught by, and forced to wade through the rising tide; those were pleasures all unknown to glaring, fashionable Lanceville,—all unknown to the young ladies who file out along the pavements from its schools; and whose eyes glance ever to and fro in search of excitement or admiration as they pace along. What care they for wild grey rocks, or lonely sands, where auks and other sea-birds sit motionless in rows;

for the resounding caves of Flamboro', or Scarboro's ruined castle, except when such scenes are visited with a large gay party?

But I was an only child, and had never been at school; so I wandered by myself and dreamed.

My dear father went to Scarboro' for his health, only a few months before he died; we had also visited Torquay, and Tenby, and of those places also I never wearied. They were brighter and warmer than our northern coasts; the scenery was clad in richer hues, and the sea stole in as clear as crystal; but I think I loved the grey Yorkshire coast, with its storm and mist, and its wild rocky bays, the best. I had known Scarboro' from childhood; and every time I went there, I became more and more attached to its grey rocks and ruins. It is now more than ten years since I last saw it, and I hear that it is much enlarged, much gayer than of old; and I feel disappointed when it is thus described, for under its new aspect I should not love it half so well. And yet I

should like to visit it again for the sake of 'old lang syne;'—just to renew ancient associations, and revisit former haunts.

"Ah, adieu to those old associations!" I sighed as, roused by Miss Prince's voice, I rose and accompanied her to 'do a little shopping.' Endless task! One shop led to another, and the next to half-a-dozen more; and my good friend was so long in choosing what she wanted that we were a quarter of an hour beyond the appointed time, and returned to Victoria Crescent to find Mrs. Loxley already seated at the luncheon-table; and moreover, looking and sounding rather cross.

"Well, you are not very punctual people," she exclaimed. "I suppose you have been accustomed to dawdle through the day at pleasure, whilst with me punctuality has always been a virtue. And so it was with my poor dear husband, who I never kept waiting in my life. Come, take off your bonnets, and sit down. What have you been doing? Trailing about the Parade, I pre-

sume, to get yourself stared at by the men. I seldom go upon the Parade, for I don't care to make myself conspicuous."

I only laughed at this odd speech; but Miss Prince thought it necessary to attempt some excuse, and was forthwith questioned vehemently; Mrs. Loxley's curiosity appearing quite insatiable.

"Went to Cox's? did you? What did you go there for, I wonder? A nasty cheap shop, where the things don't wear at all. You should always go to the best shops, as I told you yesterday."

"Yes, if one had only plenty of money," I remarked; "but five pounds cannot be made to go so far as twenty."

Mrs. Loxley looked contemptuous and unconvinced, as if despising us for our poverty, yet ready to attack us for our meanness,—a not unusual failing with rich people of the common stamp.

"Well, what will you have to eat?" she next asked. "I shall save that cold chicken

for my dinner. And I think that tart need not be cut. Will you have any? I should recommend some cold ham, or a little pastry." (Pointing to a dish of uninviting tartlets, which looked as if they had helped to make a show upon the table for a month.)

It was difficult to choose when the only eatable things appeared forbidden; but at length I ventured to name bread and butter; regardless of the fact that Mrs. Loxley also economised the latter dainty. A little wine and water we were allowed.

After lunch some of our parcels arrived, and Mrs. Loxley would have them all opened that she might investigate the contents; in fact, she tore the first open "by mistake," and finding it contained a new sun-shade, she of course insisted upon knowing where it was bought, what it cost, and why I fixed upon that particular colour. She found great fault with me for only spending twelve shillings upon it, instead of a pound, pulled the silk to prove that it was "very thin and poor, and

would not wear well," and then, raising it over her head, she shook it about, exclaiming, "It is top-heavy, and will break immediately," until she nearly cracked the stem. And so on with all the other parcels, until I was quite tired of her impertinent remarks.

I was just meditating an escape, when a visitor appeared—an old lady, who seemed fond of gossip; and to her Mrs. Loxley presently remarked,

"These ladies are thinking of settling at Fairwater. I think you have been there, Miss White; and if so, you can perhaps give them some information on the subject."

"So," I thought, "our worthy hostess intends us to go there. She thinks we shall be in her way if we remain at Lanceville; and for my part, I would rather be a little farther off, as she would undoubtedly be always prying into our affairs."

Accordingly, I listened, with interest, to Miss White's reply; but did not learn much from that lady.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "they will find it a very nice place, very nice, indeed. I never stayed there, certainly, and so don't know much about the town and its resources; but I once went over for the day, with another young lady, and we rode donkeys, and went to a little shop, and bought some buns and ginger beer, and had a sort of pic-nic, lying on the beach. It was very pleasant, and we enjoyed ourselves extremely; so, Miss Brandreth, I should certainly advise you to go there."

"Oh, yes, you cannot do better," added Mrs. Loxley; "from Miss White's description, it appears just the sort of place for you, —quiet, and not too much dress required."

"Oh, dear no," put in Miss White; "persons of the most limited means may get on well enough there; for I went in quite an old gown, and found myself as fashionably dressed as any of my neighbours."

This speech produced a hearty laugh from both the old ladies, who seemed to consider

it an excellent joke; and I said, somewhat drily,

"I shall certainly look at a place so strongly recommended. Lanceville is empty enough now; but, in the season, I should think it would be too gay and glaring to suit me."

"Of course it would!" cried Mrs. Loxley. "Lanceville is only a suitable residence for persons possessing a certain income and position; whilst, at Fairwater, you would get on very well."

I would not betray the annoyance caused by the overbearing manner of my hostess, for it did not seem at all worth while. I merely made some slight answer, and took the earliest opportunity of escaping from the room, retiring upstairs to my own, in hopes of a little rest and peace. I was doomed to disappointment, however, for, presently, a slight rustling made me turn my head, and there stood Rose, rummaging in a wardrobe, for some of Mrs. Loxley's numerous bonnets

and mantles, which filled almost every drawer, shelf, and box, in the house, and which she was wont to send for to display to visitors. After Rose had departed, I composed myself again, and once more opened a book, which I had carried upstairs (Mrs. Loxley possessed a few books, although she was no great reader, as may be easily guessed), when, lo ! a strange sound aroused me for the second time, and, starting up, I discovered the fat butler, in the act of drawing a heavy box from beneath the bed. Much surprised, I stared at him, without a word, upon which he remarked, in a patronising tone,

“Pray don’t disturb yourself, Miss, I am only getting some plate out before dinner.”

And, having selected the required articles, he departed, leaving me all astonishment, for I thought he might at least have knocked before intruding ; and, moreover, all the arrangements of the house appeared to me exceedingly odd.

“Well, what next ?” I said to myself, as

it an easier job than I will have to come down, daily, to do it myself."

"I shall manage it," returned the butler, strongly recommending the general, seemed to consider it an honour to hold his own ground. "But I have always been accustomed to consider my way right."

"If you think you it is wrong, and that something about it," was the reply. "You might as well bring me so much to eat. I can't touch it, so you might as well take it away, and eat it yourself, if you

my poor uncle would have pressed such undignified proposals. I certainly thought Mrs. was such a great lady, both in her manner, and in that of sundry of her habits too.

I thought that, poor as I was, and airy as the house appeared (with the exception of the drawbacks which I have

"Florence! Florence! what are you doing up there, all the afternoon? Are you never coming down again?"

Be it known that in my parent's life-time, Mrs. Loxley—who had respected them on account of their position, and my uncle still more for his wealth—had always addressed me as "Miss Brandreth;" but now she did nothing but call, "Florence! Florence!" whenever I happened to be absent for a moment.

"No rest in this house, it appears," I murmured; and descended, to be asked a hundred questions, and be told, reproachfully, that I ought to have come in to see Mrs. Colonel Jones and Miss Lamont.

Then, more talk of Fairwater, and its advantages; then dinner, which was nicely served, and where there certainly was enough to eat—its monotony being relieved by a discussion between Mrs. Loxley and Thompson, as to the proper way of dressing salads; ending with an indignant,

"Oh, I see I shall have to come down, and show you how to do it myself."

"Very well, ma'am," returned the butler, who, obsequious in general, seemed to consider it a point of honour to hold his own opinion here; "but I have always been accustomed to consider my way right."

"Stuff! I tell you it is wrong, and that you know nothing about it," was the rejoinder. "You might as well bring me so much hay to eat. I can't touch it, so you may take it away, and eat it yourself, if you like."

How astonished my poor uncle would have been, had he witnessed such undignified proceedings; and I certainly thought Mrs. Loxley's manners anything but polished, though she was such a great lady, both in her own estimation, and in that of sundry of her neighbours too.

I thought that, poor as I was, and airy and comfortable as the house appeared (with the exception of the drawbacks which I have

enumerated), I would rather have starved in a hut, than have undertaken to live with Mrs. Loxley, even had she offered me a thousand a-year, for I felt as if such a life of incessant fidget and small annoyances would very soon have worn me out. Even the "Retreat" seemed almost preferable now.

Miss Prince, however, did not appear to share my sentiments. On the contrary, she seemed to revel in the luxuries by which she was once more surrounded (when permitted to enjoy them)—to delight in the paltry-gossip and excitement of Victoria Crescent, and to take Mrs. Loxley's rude behaviour as a matter of course;—in fact, I think it made her really respect the latter all the more. And when it suited the great lady to be affable and condescending, how poor Miss Prince would brighten up, instead of growing more reserved, like me.

I had forgotten to mention that in the morning, the following order was given to the butler in our presence.

“Thompson, go out and buy some fish—soles; or, I think, some whittings. It would be a treat to these ladies, so go and do your best.”

I felt annoyed; but Miss Prince smiled, and looked as if she properly appreciated the attention; and at dinner-time, she lavished much praise upon the fish, whilst Mrs. Loxley talked about the price, and so forth, until she quite destroyed my appetite.

There was no chance of going out any more; and oh, how glad I was when bed-time came, and how unwilling the following morning to go over the same ground again. But it was necessary; and so, internally vowing that I would soon extricate myself from this unpleasant position, into which I had so blindly rushed, I dressed by a desperate effort, and descended to Mrs. Loxley and family prayers;—this time being in at the beginning.

CHAPTER XII.

LODGING-HUNTING, AND PREPARATIONS FOR
ANOTHER MOVE.

IN the morning, Mrs. Loxley employed me to write various letters, touching the character of servants, as she had quite made up her mind to part with Rose; and afterwards I was allowed to go out with Miss Prince; so I asked the latter to come and look at some lodgings, in case we decided to remain at Lanceville for the present. But Lanceville was a very large place, and with no one to

direct us, we knew not where to go; so we wandered up and down at random, and found no rooms at all suited to our means. Miss Prince soon grew tired of the quest, and began to cast longing eyes upon the shops; a bonnet-shop upon the Esplanade seeming to possess especial attractions, so, after hovering round the windows for some time, into it she rushed at last.

The atmosphere within was oppressive; so I soon signified my intention of sitting upon a bench opposite, whilst she made her choice; and was just leaving the shop, when I caught sight of what seemed a familiar countenance. A matronly lady, with a comely face, was giving directions about a smart bonnet; adding, as she turned away,

“Send it to the Bath Hotel in half an hour; for I am returning to Fairwater this afternoon.”

“Yes, ma’am,” was the answer. “Mrs. Reid;—the Bath Hotel.”

The name made assurance doubly sure,

and leaving the shop at the same time, whilst Miss Prince remained to study the comparative merits and demerits of pink, and blue, and mauve, and yellow crape, I advanced to greet the lady, whom I had recognised as an old acquaintance of my mother's.

Mrs. Reid appeared surprised and puzzled, till I said,

"Of course you do not recognise me. I am Florence Brandreth, and I was scarcely fourteen when I saw you last."

Then she smiled, and seemed glad to meet with me again; asking a variety of questions, which I answered to the best of my ability. She expressed much concern upon hearing of my changed fortunes, and recommended me by all means to try Fairwater, where she was then staying on account of her husband's health.

"It is a quiet little place, with nothing particular going on; but I daresay you will not care about that. The shops are poor, and

I think everybody runs over by train to buy their things at Lanceville; but as it is no distance, that only makes a little change. If you like to come some morning and look about you, I shall be glad to give you all the help and information in my power. If you cannot fix to-morrow, just send a line beforehand, to ensure my being in."

I could not fix upon the morrow without first speaking to Mrs. Loxley, so I promised to write; and then we sat down upon a bench by the sea, and talked, till Miss Prince joined us, which was not particularly soon. Mrs. Reid's pleasant, friendly manners were quite reviving, and a talk about old times still more so; and therefore, I decided on the spot that I would give Fairwater a trial, if only for her sake. She was only staying there for some weeks, certainly, but in that time we might get established in a house or lodgings (Miss Prince and myself, I mean), and her friendship might prove a decided advantage; whilst at Lanceville, there was no one whom

I could really call a friend. So, guided by chance, I had settled what I wished before Miss Prince appeared. Mrs. Reid was in haste, for she had more shopping to do, and was afraid of missing the train to Fairwater ; so she soon took leave of me, and I lost sight of her with regret ; such a novelty had a friendly face become !

Miss Prince made no objections to the Fairwater plan, so we looked at no more Lanceville lodgings. I told Mrs. Loxley of my rencontre, and on the next day but one started for Fairwater alone. Miss Prince wished to go too, but I thought I could manage better without her ; and therefore persuaded her to remain with Mrs. Loxley, who might have been displeased, had both her visitors left her for the day.

Mrs. Loxley asked innumerable questions, and thought (but wherefore, I don't know) my chance meeting with an old acquaintance very strange ; was half inclined to be jealous and affronted, yet being at the same time

relieved by the prospect of our migrating to Fairwater, she at length consented to let me go.

I drove to the Lanceville station; the ten miles' journey was soon over,—without adventure, or misadventure,—and I took a second cab to Clifton Terrace; thinking the green fields which surrounded the railway-station, and the trees which hung over garden-walls at Fairwater, as well as the numerous little gardens themselves, looked pleasant as I drove along.

Mrs. Reid received me with the same friendly smile, and we sallied forth together; but I soon found that good as her intentions were, she knew little or nothing of the art of taking lodgings, or the difficulties surrounding people with small incomes. She could say enough upon these subjects, certainly, but theory and practice are two entirely different things, and I speedily found that, limited as my experience was, it would be far safer to trust my own judgment in such matters. She

was a good guide, however; and together we visited numerous houses, large and small; by the sea, away from it, semi-detached, in terraces, and in streets; until I was fairly tired with so much talking, bargaining, and walking. Fairwater was much smaller than Lanceville, and the green lawns in front of many houses broke their long monotonous lines, and made the town appear more pleasant.

One of the first houses we entered was large, and in a tolerably good situation, but we were admitted by a dirty girl,—and shown into a sitting-room which smelt rather strongly of tobacco smoke.

“Missis is dressing; but I’ll tell her,” said the girl; and disappeared; and presently Mrs. Haigh came in;—a young, rather good-looking person, whose manners and movements appeared superior to those of the generality of her class. She bowed and entered upon business; explained that her husband had been smoking in that room, but

had taken flight on our arrival; ("Rather free and easy, though," I thought), and then she proceeded to show us some apartments. Her terms were somewhat high; but she said she would consider the matter, and see if she could afford to let us any of the back rooms at a lower price.

"I feel quite upset just now," she added; "and can hardly tell you at this moment; for it all depends upon what rooms I have to spare, and as I have just quarrelled with my upstairs lodger, I don't know whether she will go or stay."

Mrs. Reid asked how that was, and closing the door carefully behind her, Mrs. Haigh seated herself in an easy attitude, and began, confidentially, to tell the history of her wrongs.

"Why you see, she is an old maid, and the fact is she's rather sweet upon Mr. Saunderson, the clergyman. You know him, I dare say; he's a widower, and she fancies, or

fancied, that he was in love with her, so she took these lodgings just to see him pass to the schools. But now she sees he does not wish for her, so she wants to be out of it, and that, I think, is the true cause of her odd behaviour."

"Impossible!" ejaculated Mrs. Reid, who was listening with true feminine interest.

Mrs. Haigh nodded decidedly, and said,

"It is a fact; for old maids like her are sillier than anyone; and so, last evening, when she came in from somewhere, she told me some one had been at her wine. 'How can that be, ma'am?' I asked, 'Did you not lock it up when you went out?' 'Yes,' she replied, but hinted at a duplicate key, which made me very angry, of course; for I went out when she went out, and on my return she met me in the hall. Now I believe the truth was this.—I have some very good scent in my room, and the servant and the little girl had got at it, and she perceived this, and

thought it was her wine; and hence her indirect attack upon me. But I told her I would not stand it,—and I won't."

"But," said Mrs. Reid, soothingly, "I should think no more about it if I were you. It is very unpleasant; but if she goes, you may get a more agreeable lodger in her place."

"Go! Oh yes, she may go, if she likes; but if she does, she shall pay me for the six months the rooms were taken for. That is what she is afraid of, and she is crying about it now, and wants me to let her off her bargain. But I won't, that I won't!" And Mrs. Haigh clenched her little hand, and compressed her lips. "I'll have justice, whether she decides to go or stay. She took the rooms for six months, at two guineas a week, and pay for them she shall, for her impertinence."

"But," I remarked, "it would surely be very disagreeable to keep her here against her will. The poor woman has doubtless an

irritable and suspicious temper, and it would be more generous to let her go."

Mrs. Haigh set her teeth and put on a look of determination which ill became so young a face.

"Ah, that is it—her dreadful temper. She can't help it, poor creature, I believe. When she came, she was all smiles and affection; made such friends with me, was always kissing me, and it was 'My dear Mrs. Haigh,' and all that sort of thing. But I would much rather she had kept her love and kisses to herself. And now she has as good as accused me of stealing, and I am going straight to a lawyer to manage this affair. Justice! Justice! I've a right to justice, and I'll have it too."

"And a little sweet revenge as well," I said.

Mrs. Haigh laughed, but repeated her last words, adding,

"Yes, I mean it. And unless she gives me a written apology, I will have nothing

more to do with her while she stays here. If she wants anything, she may come to me, but I am not going to her again ; and so she will find in the end that she would have done much better to behave herself."

This, and much more, uttered with great vehemence, opened my eyes to the perils of rashly taking lodgings for any length of time ; and I thought that I would rather not enter into any arrangement with Mrs. Haigh. Faults there were, doubtless, on both sides, but her lodger's present position was anything but enviable—to lose the price of six months' lodgings, or to stay where she was, upon compulsion, and under the most unfavourable circumstances. In the latter case, I could read in Mrs. Haigh's countenance that Mr. Saunderson's unfortunate admirer would be doomed to six months of misery—petty slights and insults—in short, all the annoyances that one woman could inflict upon another ; and I resolved to profit by the lesson.

Mrs. Reid and I proceeded, and in the course

of our wanderings met with lodging-house people of the most varied kinds, but none like Mrs. Haigh. There was the severely-pious lodging-house woman, who hoped I should keep regular hours, and not require hot suppers on the Sabbath; and the flaunting, off-hand lady, who was quite above attending to her business, and yet did not think it beneath her to exact the uttermost farthing, to take every little thing, eatable or drinkable, which fell into her hands, and to be insolent, when occasion required. And, doubtless, this lady is generally provided with a duplicate key for the convenience of rummaging when her lodger is from home. Others there were, grim, grasping, plausible; superior, plain-spoken, slatternly; and I met with one or two sets of rooms which I thought might do for a short time, though I could not of course decide upon the moment. So we returned to Clifton Terrace, tired enough with our hard morning's work.

Mr. Reid was a quiet, gentlemanly man, in

ill-health, who appeared at luncheon, but did not talk much, so that his wife was left to do all the honours, and she certainly was most kind and attentive. I think upon this renewal of our acquaintance she took a decided fancy to me, for she was consistent in her friendship all the time she remained at Fairwater; and wrote to me frequently after her departure, expressing the utmost interest in all my doings. She was fond of society, even to the verge of frivolity, and had grand schemes for her large flock of children. But what mother is not a little worldly and scheming now-a-days? Yet with these defects, her heart was naturally kind, and her manner, when she pleased, particularly soft and winning. Her kindness to me was certainly disinterested; for what could anybody hope to gain from Florence Brandreth now—a homeless wanderer—a nobody? Mrs. Reid's friendship at this juncture was especially cheering, and I shall always remember it with gratitude.

I returned to Lanceville, tired, to be greeted

by a volley of enquiries—the hope of our moving on to Fairwater proving, as it became more and more a reality, a decided source of rejoicing to Mrs. Loxley.

The next day was Sunday, and we went to church together—the hot, glaring watering-place church appearing doubly hot and glaring after my long abstinence from all church-going. It was pleasant to hear the bells once more, and to see the throngs of decent people proceeding in the same direction, rather over dressed for the occasion, perhaps, but still bent upon the observance of the sacred day. I thought of the savages who dwelt round the “Retreat,” and their heathenish ways, and felt thankful that I had once more returned to civilization, and was able to kneel with my neighbours in the house of prayer.

I never felt more seriously disposed than when I entered St. Mary’s Church ; but Mrs. Loxley’s behaviour soon put an end to thoughts of that description. She had

hurried us off very early, and filled up the interval before the service began in the following manner.

First: She gazed round at the people who were entering; then she turned to tell me who they were, and to give me various scraps of information about the church, the clergyman, the pew where we were sitting, and the singing; after which she seized hold of the sleeve of my jacket, whispering,

“Is this new?”

I had to answer,

“No; not quite.”

And then she added,

“Where did you buy it?”

Satisfied upon this point, she presently transferred her attention to my veil, enquiring,

“Did this come from Day’s?”

I nodded an assent, and then she began to examine her own cloak and dress with interest, as if she had never seen them before. But presently she pulled my sleeve again, to

attract attention, saying, in the loudest whisper,

“Look! look! That is Lady Belmont coming in. She sits just a few seats before us. What a splendid Indian shawl! Tell me, is that gold in the border?”

And so on, till all devotional feelings vanished, perforce, and when the service began I found it difficult to fix my attention; Mrs. Loxley yawning, fidgeting, and whispering all the time; and alternately twirling her fingers, and examining her gown.

We dined early, and to escape from my good hostess, I went to church again, alone, in the afternoon, for Miss Prince preferred remaining at home and listening to the monotonous questions drawn forth by the sight of the passers-by, of whom Mrs. Loxley had a good view from her post beside the window.

A strong east wind had been blowing for a day or two; the sun was hot, and so was the church, whilst in the shade it was more than chilly; so my homeward walk, after sitting

in an intensely hot place for upwards of an hour and a half, gave me a bad sore throat and cold, which gained upon me so rapidly that by tea-time I could scarcely speak. Mrs. Loxley had no mercy, and compelled me to exert myself, so that I had to eat, drink, and talk to please her, to my no slight pain and inconvenience. My head ached and throbbed too, and I felt that I had committed an imprudence in going to church twice, out of health as I was, and after having been debarred from any attendance there for such a length of time.

As the evening wore on, Mrs. Loxley regarded my flushed face and heavy eyes with increasing apprehension, and at length seemed to be filled with a dread that I might be laid up in her house; hoping that I was not beginning with the "new sore throat" (diphtheria), and sending Thompson for hartshorn and oil at nearly ten o'clock.

Morning came; and I was scarcely able to speak or stir, so I remained in the house all

day; Mrs. Loxley's fidgeting ways, from which there was now no respite, becoming almost intolerable, and making me long to be settled independently at Fairwater; and all the more, that I could see she was anxious to be rid of me.

So I wrote to Mrs. Reid, and bade her take some lodgings which I had approved of for the following Wednesday, telling Madame, who made a feint of asking me to stay a day or two longer, or at least not to hurry,—but who evidently did not mean it, and whose countenance betrayed the highest satisfaction when I declined her unwilling offer. I speak of “I” and “me”; not because I am forgetting poor Miss Prince, but because during our sojourn at Lanceville she had become the merest cipher,—a silent shadow of her former self.

The next day was chilly and showery, but all the same I went out,—feeling a degree better, and thus increased my cold; but Victoria Crescent (No. 5) was unendurable for

any length of time. Evening brought an answer from Mrs. Reid, but alas! a disappointing one. Through some misunderstanding the large, airy rooms, facing the sea, on which I had set my heart, were not to be had, and smaller lodgings in a less pleasant situation had been taken in their stead;—the price the same, whilst they were far inferior in every way. However, the prospect of speedy release from Mrs. Loxley's domicile rendered me indifferent to such minor grievances; and the appointed day having arrived, Miss Prince and I took leave of her and got into our fly; Mrs. Loxley's last words being,

“So you intend to take a house? Well, I shall come over, and have a look at you as soon as you are settled, and see what sort of a place you fix upon.”

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. BALL'S LODGINGS.

THE short journey was soon over, but we were taken by such a circuitous route to Mrs. Ball's lodgings that Fairwater appeared treble its actual size. Arrived at the little stuffy row of buildings,—Claremont Place by name,—we stopped at the door of No. 2, and it looked so small and dingy, and the landlady so hot, and large, and loud-tongued, that my heart sank within me at the prospect of entering. It seemed impossible to breathe there,

or to get up and down those narrow stairs; and Mrs. Ball evidently thought our luggage could not, for she began to protest vehemently against "all them things being brought into her house." This was an awkward and unexpected climax, but fortunately we contrived to pacify her; and choking back our feelings of disgust went in;—ditto, the unlucky boxes, which had nowhere else to go, and so were carried up, some into the little close bedrooms, and some into the equally small and crowded sitting-room. Then we had time to take a survey of the place, and it did not tend to raise our spirits.

The sitting-room, with the western sun shining full in at the windows, looked into a cabbage garden, with a board up in the midst announcing that that valuable plot of ground was to be sold for building purposes; the walls of the said room were covered with a flaunting rhubarb and ginger coloured paper of the largest and most vulgar pattern, with the rest of the furniture and adornments to

match. It was tolerably clean, certainly, but so very hot and glaring; whilst we could touch the bedroom ceilings with our hands—an unpleasant change after Mrs. Loxley's large and airy rooms; but still, I reflected, we should be more independent here.

Presently, Mrs. Reid, accompanied by one of her little girls, arrived, but she did not stay many minutes; and her good-natured face was the last pleasant thing we saw that evening. We ordered tea, and whilst it was preparing, I lay down upon the slippery horse-hair sofa, for I had a bad headache, and felt almost suffocated. Mrs. Ball bustled in and out, and after staring at me several times, asked Miss Prince if the young lady was not well.

"Not very," was the answer.

"Oh, I thought so," said our worthy landlady, "by her lying down. She looks a weakly sort of creature," with an air of pity, bordering on contempt. And then she added,

“I’m not so very strong myself, although I look well, for I’m always so flue upon my chest.”

The word “flue” puzzled me; and what was meant by it I do not know to the present day, but certainly it could be no affection of the lungs, or she would not have had strength to scream and shout as she did at her husband, who was a quiet, respectable man; at the little girl who played the part of servant; at her lodgers; at the passers-by;—at anyone, and everyone, in fact.

Her lower rooms were let to a fat old gentleman and lady (by courtesy), who were probably well off, for she appeared to treat them with much respect, and let the former smoke his pipe in-doors, whilst she sat and chatted with him on the most familiar terms. The odour of the said pipe mounted to our rooms, and did not prove by any means beneficial to my cold and headache; but it would have been useless to remonstrate, so I bore it as patiently as possible, whilst Miss Prince

grumbled, and regretted Mrs. Loxley's more luxuriant abode.

Scarcely were we settled before a violent thunder-storm burst over the town, rendering it necessary to shut the windows, for the wind blew fiercely, and the rain beat in. The lightning flashed into every corner of the small apartment; and there we sat, half stifled and quite dazzled;—Miss Prince querulous and frightened, and I far from well, and thoroughly down-hearted. In the midst, up ran Mrs. Ball to ask if we were alarmed, and she seized the opportunity to stay and tell us sundry anecdotes, first of thunderstorms, and then of lodgers, with a degree of volubility, and in a tone of voice which absolutely made me giddy.

The storm subsided, and with it Miss Prince's fears, and that good lady resuming the use of her tongue too, began to make sundry enquiries about the town and residents of Fairwater; Mrs. Ball answering all her questions very glibly, though, as we after-

wards ascertained, not always quite correctly. It is extraordinary how that class of people always distort and exaggerate facts, and by colouring matters with the vile tints of their own vulgar minds, render them totally unlike the truth, even when their stories are originally founded upon fact. Thus, the residents of Fairwater might belong to a second-rate class of society, and yet be innocent of the enormities of which Mrs. Ball believed them guilty; for, according to her, they were all vicious and worthless in their different ways; her too ready tongue pouring forth scandal, and only sparing the characters of her especial patrons, who were lauded to the skies. Vain did I hope at every pause that she would leave the room, for, encouraged by Miss Prince, she talked on till she was fairly out of breath; and even then, after making two or three feints of going, ran back for a few last words, so that it was very late before she really went.

Then we went to bed, and upon going into

my room, I found one of the legs of the dressing table supported by a book in a crimson velvet cover, and curiosity induced me to remove the latter for inspection. It proved to be a book of prayers, and preparation for receiving the Holy Communion; and shocked by Mrs. Ball's profanity, I laid the little volume on the table, instead of underneath, supplying its former place with a piece of wood; but lo! the next day it was replaced, and that time I was cowardly enough to leave it there, being rather in dread of the loud-tongued Mrs. Ball.

I slept badly enough, and was roused early by her voice, for Mrs. Ball made a point of minding everybody's business as well as her own, and of tyrannising over all the inmates of the house.

"Lor', Miss, you're late this morning," she exclaimed, as I emerged from my room at half-past nine. "I've been waiting ever so long to get in and make the bed. Here, Molly, look sharp there. Drat the girl!

She's always muddling in some corner when I want her. Ah, you are there. Make haste, then," she added, as the thin, precocious looking child emerged from some hiding place, where she had doubtless been making the best use of her eyes and ears.

Disgusted by the clamour raised by this most vulgar of all vulgar women, I fled into the sitting-room, and closed the door, but was forthwith pursued by my tormentor, who setting down her pails and brushes on the landing, stood with arms a-kimbo to hear our orders, or rather to tell us what to do.

The evening before she had edified us by an account of a certain lodger who had committed the unheard-of atrocity of wishing to dine late, and the fatal consequences of such a crime.

"I soon let her see that would not do," said Mrs. Ball. "'Come, ma'am,' I said, 'I'm not going to have this sort of work with you, so if this is to go on, you must leave my house. I can't keep my kitchen fire in, and be mud-

dling and cooking, and washing up, until all sorts of hours, so you must either dine at my time, or you must go.' "

"And which did she do?" Miss Prince had enquired, with breathless interest.

"Oh, she soon gave in. Drat it" (Mrs. Ball's favourite expression), "I was not going to stand any nonsense of that kind, so she came round to early dinners, and we got on pretty tolerably after that."

We took the hint, and endeavoured to conform as much as possible to the rules and regulations of Mrs. Ball's house, so long as we were in it, and at her mercy ; but I resolved to look out for a house without delay. To my mind, all lodgings are detestable, especially cheap ones, as the people belonging to the latter are generally of the roughest and most unpleasant kind—such savages in all their notions, and so overbearing and grasping, too. Mrs. Ball appeared to be possessed by a mania for scrubbing and cleaning up and down the house all day long ;


so that we encountered her at every turn, when, if she was amiable, she detained us whilst she told long anecdotes ; and if the reverse, she asked a number of questions, and threw out a great many impertinent hints.

“Don’t you think, Miss, you would be better if you did not lie in bed so late? The doctors always say it’s bad for weakly people. And, bless you, if I was a dawdle, I should never get through half my work.”

I felt much annoyed at being exposed to the insolence and ignorance of a woman of this class, but did not think it worth while to move before we had found a house, as who could certify that the next lodging we entered would not be equally disagreeable, or worse? I would not condescend to answer ; but, ill as I often felt, such remarks were most unpleasant, and tried my patience more than many greater evils—gnat-stings, again, to irritate one beyond endurance. In truth, during the journey through life, the unlucky traveller is too often harassed and enraged by these teas-

ing insects, until all powers of enjoyment seem to fail; nay, even the grander qualities which we bring to bear on great emergencies are lost sight of, and our minds contract until there is no room left for anything but small vexations. Happy those who possess the most equable temper and the toughest nerves, for they will fare the best, whilst woe to the poor, irritable, over-sensitive wretch, who alternately shrinks from, and endeavours to contend with these all but invisible foes, for he is sure to get worsted in the unequal struggle.

The morning was gusty and showery, but we went out, took a look round the town, which did not show to the best advantage, with its sloppy streets and desolate Parade; and so back again to our small sitting-room, with the rhubarb and ginger paper flaunting on the walls; and worse than that, the prospect of Mrs. Ball breaking in upon us at a moment's notice. "What will become of us," was my sad thought, "or rather of myself,



for Miss Prince has friends and relatives, whilst I am all alone? A life like mine is very dreary, moving from place to place, without hope or aim; now in a rough part of the country—now in a dull town, exposed to affronts and annoyances on all sides, whether in lodgings, in the houses of acquaintance, or in a hired cottage of our own. Must my prospects always remain thus dark, or will they ever change?"

There was no voice to answer. All was dreary silence within my heart, and all a gloomy blank without. I sat down by one of the windows, and gazed sideways down the row of houses till my eyes rested on the dull grey sea, from which Claremont Place ran back, and oh! how I wished that I had "the wings of a dove to flee away and be at rest." But whither? Ah, on earth there seemed no resting-peaceful place for me.

A visitor's knock aroused me from this miserable train of thought, and Mrs. Reid appeared, smiling, and smartly dressed as

formerly, the brightness of her dress according well with the cheerful expression of her face. We talked about houses, and she mentioned one which she thought might suit, carrying us off to see it that very afternoon, and by thus giving me new occupation and ideas, furnishing me with fresh strength to shake off the depression which would seize upon me every now and then.

Mrs. Reid led us to the furthest extremity of the town, and there, far back from the sea stood a little row of bow-windowed houses, containing six small rooms a-piece. The view was similar to that we had in Claremont Place—a vegetable garden, portioned out in plots, and beyond, dull backs of houses, with one tiny peep of sea between the roofs. My heart sank as, entering the small dwelling she had mentioned, Mrs. Reid exclaimed triumphantly—

“There, dear, nothing could be nicer, could it? I am sure I could make myself quite happy here.”

I tried to look pleased, but by no means shared her feelings, though I thought that all depended upon circumstances.

“Even a little house like this, with love and hope to cheer it, would look bright; but alone; or, rather, when shared with Miss Prince—”

I left the mental observation half ended; or, rather, finished with a shudder of dismay, whilst I mechanically echoed,

“Very nice, indeed.” The sound of my own voice sounding strangely dreary in the little empty room.

The ceilings seemed so low, the rooms so very small, that I felt as if, spite of my desire to escape from Mrs. Ball, I had not courage to make up my mind at once.

“It is nice and open at the back,” said Mrs. Reid—“such a fresh breeze blowing from the Downs.”

And there I cordially agreed with her, for the look-out from the back was pleasant, and the air as fresh as fresh could be.

The landlord, a plausible Methodist—an upholsterer and undertaker by profession—pointed out all the advantages of his house, and the numerous applications with which he had been overwhelmed, until Mrs. Reid was seized with a sudden dread of losing it, whilst its attractions appeared proportionately increased. Drawing me aside, she whispered, hurriedly,

“You will be very fortunate if you secure it, so don’t let it slip through your fingers, dear.”

Still, free from her enthusiasm, I hesitated, saying,

“I should like to look at one or two others, before I quite decide.”

Mrs. Reid seemed not only disappointed, but annoyed, as people generally are when they want to help you, and find they cannot do so exactly their own way.

“Just as you please, dear,” she replied; “but I know I would not lose the chance.”

“Only give me till to-morrow,” I en-

treated; and Mr. Green, overhearing the remark, instantly informed me that he could not wait long, but must close with "another party who was about it," if he did not hear from me upon the morrow.

Miss Prince was walking up and down, ejaculating,

"Very nice and snug. At least, I daresay some people would think so; but, after the places one has been accustomed to—after Carlton—why, it seems a miserable little place. Preferable to that detestable 'Retreat,' certainly,—it could not well be worse; but, still—"

And she broke off with an expressive shrug.

"Ah, yes," chimed in the pleasant voice of Mrs. Reid, "you may well say 'after Carlton.' But when one cannot obtain all one wants, one must take the best that one can get."

"True," I whispered. "Have patience with me; I am not dissatisfied, nor unreasonable; but—"

"But it is hard upon you, dear, I know. This change! But I think you might be very comfortable here."

"The last ladies were," said Mr. Green, again catching up the final word. "Very comfortable. And they would never have left my house, had they not taken charge of four orphan nephews and nieces, from India, and so required more room. They were very sorry to go, and I was sorry to lose them, too, for they were good tenants, and gave but little trouble. However, I hope, if you decide, ladies, we shall get on equally well; and I shall certainly do my best to meet your wishes."

With these words, he bowed us out, and, locking the house-door, put the key in his pocket, and went back to his shop, which was conveniently near at hand.

Miss Prince and I accompanied Mrs. Reid to look at every house which displayed a bill in the window; and I think the latter must have had great patience, for I led her in and

out, upstairs and down, and asked innumerable questions; but none of the small domiciles appeared half so suitable as Mr. Green's. Either the rent was too high, or they would only let them for a term of years, or there was some other objection; so that every minute No. 25, Park Buildings, seemed more and more inevitable; yet I resolved to have one more hunt upon the following morning.

Mrs. Reid's house and our lodgings were rather far apart; and, as hers came first, we left her there on our return, receiving an invitation to come in a little in the evening, if we were not very tired. I was; but, as she seemed to wish it, and Miss Prince to be rather looking forward to the outing, I resolved to go, after resting a little, and partaking of a cup of tea.

Enter Mrs. Ball, looking very hot and red, to inform us that it was "past tea-time," and she thought we were never coming back. She seemed curious to know

what we had been doing; but I would not tell her; yet she lingered on, and in the course of conversation, informed us that the gentleman down stairs "was an alderman from Lun'on, who kept his carriage, and had been to court." No doubt she fancied we should be much impressed by this important intelligence; but even Miss Prince screwed up her lips, and looked away, whilst I merely answered,

"Oh, indeed. Mrs. Ball, we are going out this evening."

"Are you, though? Where to, I wonder?"

"Mrs. Reid's," I replied, feeling, however, far more inclined to answer, "Never mind."

"Mrs. Reid's! Well, I suppose you find it dull here, and like to see a little life. You remind me of a young person who was staying here some time ago, and who—"

Alas! she was running off into one of her endless tales; so, foreseeing that if we tried to sit it out, we should never get off that

evening, I was obliged, rude as it might seem, and impolitic, to cut her short, by saying,

"Excuse me, but we have no time to lose. Will you tell Molly to take some hot water to our rooms, and bring up tea?"

"Tea! Why, bless you! I thought you just said you were going out to tea?"

"I said we were going out this evening; but we wish for tea first, if you please."

"Well, you can have it, for the kettle's been boiling for this hour or more. Mr. and Mrs. Blunt have had their tea, and we've washed up and put away this ever so long ago. They are such nice people—so regular; they never give a bit of trouble, but have their meals to a minute. Those are the sort of people that I like, for then you know what you are about."

Exit Mrs. Ball; and, in due time, we contrived to get some tea, to rest for five minutes, and to change our dresses; after which, we once more sallied forth. But as we were

descending the stairs, she re-appeared, to say,

“How long shall you be? You mustn’t be late, or I shall lock you out. After my work’s done, I get tired, and don’t feel inclined to sit up for anyone.”

“Make yourself easy on that point,” I answered, “we shall be back by about half-past nine.”

And thus we left the house.

END OF VOL. II.

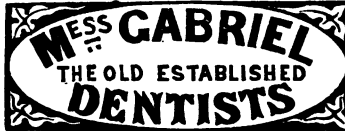


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